

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media

Issue 36

May 1991

Source: ejumpcut.org

Jump Cut was founded as a print publication by John Hess, Chuck Kleinhans, and Julia Lesage in Bloomington, Indiana, and published its first issue in 1974. It was conceived as an alternative publication of media criticism—emphasizing left, feminist, and LGBTQ perspectives. It evolved into an online publication in 2001, bringing all its back issues with it.

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Table of Contents

Jump Cut, No. 36, May 1991

Gulf war television by Ernest Larsen
The Ploughman's Lunch by Tony Williams
War films by Kali Tal
House of Games by Laura Kipnis
Heathers by Nick Burns
Low-budget alternatives by Charles Eidsvik
African and black diaspora film and video by Mark A. Reid
André Dauterive interview by Mark A. Reid
Emitai and Ceddo by G.H. Kindam, M. Steele
Come Back Africa by Ntongela Matilda
Hollywood's apartheid: 3 films by Nicholas Wellington
Anglophone African media by Frank Ukadike
U.S. black family film by Mark A. Reid
Dr. Roland Jefferson interview by Elizabeth Jackson
Barbara McCullough interview by Elizabeth Jackson
Films of Isaac Julien by José Arroyo
Ethnic Notions and Tongues Untied by Chuck Kleinhans
Marion Riggs interview by C. Kleinhans, J. Lesage
"P.C." hysteria by the Editors

To navigate:

Other than the table of contents the links inside a PDF are active.

Use the bookmarks to the left on a PDF file. If they don't appear click the small ribbon icon on the left edge.

Search by using ctrl-F (PC) or command-F (Mac). Clicking "Edit" on the top ribbon will bring up a menu that also has a find function (PC or Mac).

If you're on the Archive website then use the "Search inside" field at the top right.

Other options are available for different types of files.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Gulf War TV

by Ernest Larsen

from *Jump Cut*, no. 36, May 1991, pp. 3-10

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From this distance — the other side of the official ceasefire — everyone would agree that the image we saw most often throughout television coverage of Desert Storm certainly was not drawn from combat. Nor was the most frequent image the Scud missile attacks, nor the many classic close ups of the innocent faces of young grunts, nor even the ceaseless ripple of countless yellow ribbons. What we saw most often was a formula along the lines of: *Cleared by military censors*. Between *by* and *military*, or sometimes instead of *military*, we would invariably see the name of a country. So it was brought home to us that all these nations must employ battalions of such spectral censors. Perhaps I missed it but I never saw a single interview with a censor from any country. This was an odd omission on the part of the media, which often appeared ready, if not downright desperate, to interview anybody no matter how peripherally related to the war. Considering also the legions of retired generals who came out of mothballs to pretend to impersonate impartial experts on military strategy, why weren't any senior citizen censors dusted off for the viewers' edification?

This omission adds another unseen edge to the invisible power of the censor, of course. In what desert of the imagination had our censors received their basic training? And of what specific regimen did their basic training consist when what they were expected to kill was not human beings but moving images? Each time that subtitle appeared, like a label or a logo over images of the war, more questions, more gaps, more ambiguities, more indeterminacies became raised along with it. How could we credit what we saw, without any knowledge of what we didn't see? The force of sheer repetition did the trick.

Soon enough though, we didn't notice which country was doing the censoring unless the human anchor (Brokaw, Rather, Jennings, whoever was standing in for Bernard Shaw on CNN) made a point of bringing that fact to our attention. Of course, the human anchor would do that over and over again when the country was Iraq but otherwise hardly at all. We were urged to be duly suspicious of Iraqi imagery. So we paid much closer attention to it, as a rule. We sat there in our living rooms staring, wondering which of the injuries was faked, which bombed buildings were actually only cosmetic makeovers, which interview with a grieving woman painstakingly staged. Should we, for a quick refresher course, go out and rent a video of *The Manchurian Candidate*? Fiendishly clever of these Iraqis to find the resources to fake all that damage as the overwhelming tonnage of bombs continued

to accumulate real damage in the weeks of the air war.

After a few days, we began to wonder what "cleared" meant. The reference here could not be to enlightenment, could it? In any case this designation soon grew so conventional that we assumed that a kind of authorship was being invoked. The images began to look as if they'd been branded by the censors, as a cowboy brands a steer, or as if they'd been signed by the censors as a painting is signed by an artist. To "clear" came to mean to "have created." The proprietary signature appended to just about every image of the war, every representation of how the war looked, was "military censor." In this way, military censors became not just the most prolific authors of war imagery but censorship and representation became synonymous. Perhaps this shouldn't come as a great surprise since the networks routinely exercise censorship on all their programming, but its nearly constant signatory acknowledgement was nonetheless disquieting. In the end it came to seem like a confession on the part of the networks, or at least an admission.

It was the first direct sign of a prospective new world order of television. Hereafter, TV seemed to be saying, we broadcast what we are given to broadcast. We are not authors, we are conduits, loyal circuits providing a direct feed from the Pentagon to the public. The networks' and CNN's subsequent reversion to programming as usual, once the Desert Storm had "cleared," cut short the still slightly open question of when, if ever, the usual proprietors of the air waves would reassert their prior privileges of authorship. The war's brevity prevented any direct confrontation with the Pentagon's assuming control over the media. It also foreclosed any inquiry into the media's supine readiness to play the Pentagon's game. The media's present orgiastic portrayal of the wave of patriotism sweeping the country only exacerbates this issue: What were the effects and implications of the Pentagon's near-total control of the representation of Desert Storm?

To examine more closely this issue of authorship, recall if you can bear it, CNN's broadcasting of the daily press briefings which provided at once a horrific and dully histrionic reenactment of the superimposition of censorship and representation, minus only the signature at the bottom of the screen. The signature was unnecessary when the putative authors, the reporters, sat there in front of us, prepared to receive the day's ration of representation, from the actual authors, the Pentagon. The real dramatic content of the Pentagon's imperial control of information in Riyadh and in Washington was to enact an elegant exercise in ritual humiliation. The keening pack of journalists took every lash and called out for more. As this distasteful enterprise continued day after day, angry callers to C-SPAN began to complain, not about the journalists' stultifying dogs-on-a-leash restraint, but about what they saw as the journalists' disgraceful impertinence, endlessly asking questions that were seldom answered. Forgetting that even the best-trained dogs bark, these callers often interpreted what was before their eyes as the betrayal of United States' interests. The reporters' predictable routine was something along the lines of, "Oh, you won't answer that question? Well, how about refusing to answer my next question as well?" For the callers, this portrayal of meekness beyond measure became outright transgression.

The callers interpreted the unmitigated, unapologetic representation of Pentagon censorship as the license of a press gone mad with power. The representation of extreme lack of freedom was interpreted as too much freedom. The Pentagon

carried out this major step forward in the history of censorship by using well-trained, personable briefers whose behavior made reporters seem like outright yahoos. CNN's live broadcast of the briefings exacerbated the contrast. The Pentagon well knew the impression this would create in U.S. living rooms.

Soon, however, the press began to find little ways if not to defend its prerogatives, at least to mention that they'd been lost. For example, a front-page story in the *Los Angeles Times* analyzed the Pentagon's strategies of control, quoting a Pentagon official, "We knew from doing our homework that the public would support our position on restricting the press." The *Times* report continued:

"The Pentagon has been studying how to conduct a television war for more than a decade, in planning sessions, military exercises, war college classes and through models of other recent military action. The conclusion...was that the press in the age of instant global communication had to be carefully controlled. Pictures in particular are a powerful weapon, which could aid the enemy and demoralize morale at home."

The Pentagon corrected the negative model of the many embarrassing press revelations during the Vietnam War with the positive model of Britain's handling of the flow of information during the Falklands War (which of course was an equally embarrassing war). Then, reporters supposedly "on the scene" were in fact kept sequestered on ships far from the actual scenes of battle, while reporters in London were fed more information by government officials.

That technical ability to model forthcoming events, in which both the Pentagon and professional athletes like to indulge (lovingly enhancing their ruminations with data banks and video graphics, etc.), is often criticized on the basis that the complex contradictions of reality in fact tend to outstrip our predictive abilities. Some crucial factor or factors are inevitably not modeled in. But in the case of television coverage of Desert Storm, the Pentagon was not concerned with the reality of a war but with how to manage its representation. Here such models proved more than accurate.

The few exceptions to this rule were weathered with considerable ease in each case. Peter Arnett's reports from Baghdad were falsely attacked as collaborationist. This accusation itself became news and thus generated many additional stories, supplying a picturesque mini desert storm of controversy. What Arnett was reporting from the Rashid Hotel paled in importance. Who can remember anything he said now? But everyone remembers those silly accusations. And then when several hundred Iraqi civilians were killed by a single smart U.S. bomb, the bomb site was labeled a "legitimate" target, while Iraq claimed that the rubble had been a shelter. This in turn helped to produce a hubbub of claims and counter-claims and commentary and interpretations of commentaries, which had the effect of burying the dead all over again under tons of verbiage.

Such relatively minor exceptions to the Pentagon's ramrod control of information indicate that the Pentagon didn't have to rely only on the media's reflex desire to keep the flag waving at all costs. It could also bank on the inherent, falsely objective tendency of the mainstream media to speedily multiply repetitive interpretations of any event. As the Pentagon's advertisers, the media followed advertising's cardinal

rule: repetition creates the impression of truth. In practice this meant pseudo-heuristic interviews with a parade of pro-government shills, whom the media identified as "experts." The actual range of interpretation emanating from these ventriloquist's dummies was not quite as wide as a sandflea's tongue. A study conducted by Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting showed that, at the same time these experts were spewing the government's line, the anti-war movement was overwhelmingly marginalized by the networks:

"FAIR examined five months of TV coverage of the Gulf crisis, from the first commitment of U.S. troops on August 8, 1990, until Jan. 3, 1991. Of a total 2855 minutes devoted to the Gulf crisis, only 29 minutes, roughly one percent, dealt with popular opposition to the U.S. military buildup."

Some local stations — one each in San Diego and Los Angeles, for instance — made it a deliberate policy not to cover anti-war demonstrations — and got away with it. Another FAIR pre-war survey of on-camera sources used in two weeks of nightly news coverage indicated that about 98% of those sources reflected "the tendency of the networks to present the war almost entirely from the view of the U.S-led coalition."

The most common ploy the networks used to prop up the tacky facade of objectivity were on-the-street interviews, a mode of representation which successfully creates an airy illusion of randomness and spontaneity to flank the rote patterns of speech common to the network hirelings. Among the hordes of so-called experts the star zombie was Anthony Cordesman, a retired Pentagon official, whose authentically ghoulish demeanor should guarantee him a lucrative career in horror films. The anchors always pretended that such "experts" were merely providing neutral information on weaponry and war strategy, but who could miss the adulation dripping from every syllable of these technofreaks' encomiums to our arsenal? These pasty veterans of the dead zone droning on and on about the spectacular, surgical efficiency and wondrous capabilities and the sheer genius of our star wars technology often seemed to push Dan Rather into a barely repressed, please don't stop now, frenzy.

One obvious effect of such exemplary coverage is that the war was seldom reported from its victims' perspective. The dead and the injured, the displaced and the refugees went unseen, except if they were Allies. What claim could mortal flesh make on our imaginations when such laser-lust possessed us? So clamorously did television praise Stormin' Norman's successful war of high-tech deception that we were clearly never supposed to gather the time or energy to notice that the means — those smart weapons — were never represented in relation to their actual ends — the decimation of a country and its people. Never, that is, except as targets, as sheer technical abstractions.

Instead of mounting a forceful "objective" counterattack to the Pentagon's technical mastery of its primary domestic target, the media, the networks and CNN joined the praise — to all intents and purposes collaborating with the Pentagon's domination. This is shown even by the few occasions when the media managed to jump out of its camouflaged playpen. When CBS reporter Bob McKeown slipped into Kuwait City ahead of U.S. forces, what he actually saw was far less significant than the fact that U.S. forces to the north were now trashing the ragged remnants

of the Iraqi forces, even though they were in full retreat. But there were no pictures of that retreat. What we saw on television was what McKeown chose to report as the "liberation" of the ravaged city. McKeown's resourcefulness was praised as one of the only times the media managed to elude the military's total control, but this taste of triumph was really the Pentagon's. All hail Caesar.

The Vietnam War had long borne the sobriquet of the Living Room War but now everyone — especially the everyones at the Pentagon — seems to agree that this accolade should have been reserved for the present age of satellite communications, Peter Arnett's description from the Rashid Hotel of the first night's air attack on Baghdad created the effective illusion that this was the first war in which the dramatic unities of time and space could be and would be observed. As audience we would experience the war's drama as it happened, finally fulfilling the stirring promise of the title of the old Walter Cronkite series, *You Are There*. In a terrible way we felt that heightening of the moment that seems like a summary judgment on the repetitive inadequacy of everyday life. For anyone who lived through the days of television coverage of the Kennedy Assassination as it unfolded, television's unique capacity for the instantaneous seems irremediably associated with an effect of truth-telling. Could we really be living through another war? Right this second? In such rare circumstances, the moment of History seems manifest in the living room.

Unfortunately, the operative word here is "seems." The impression of truth-telling was successfully created, especially during the first two days. But the portion of truth visible from the Rashid Hotel, despite its drama, was very slender. Once we realized that little visual information was actually being broadcast, our obsessive desire to tune in quickly waned. We saw less and less over the next few days, partly because we tuned in for such a short time, but also because what we saw wasn't so much television, as visual radio. And the impoverishment wasn't only visual. The reports invariably underlined the reporter's ignorance of what was actually going on. The main body of the report was actually the reporter's dramatized confession of his or her own hotel-room entrapment in ignorance. We learned such details as what the reporter had eaten for breakfast, and how uncomfortable the basement shelter was, and Bernard Shaw's annoyance about having to give up his seat to an old woman. It was as if the main effect of living in a war zone was a radical increase in egotism. We pushed the button on the remote control.

Then, when the ground war began, soon after Bush's high-noon ultimatum passed, the television became a magnet once again. It scarcely mattered that there were still no real images of combat, The Pentagon had ruled that images of people who were wounded and suffering were not to be broadcast — and the networks played along. It wouldn't be tasteful to show pictures of such things, they agreed. That night I kept CNN on for hours, unable to credit the indications that the Iraqi ground forces were being so thoroughly routed. Though there was nothing to see and though CNN kept reporting essentially the same skeletal news each half hour, we all sat there, unmoving, scarcely able to move.

So thoroughly did the television block out every other sound that we didn't notice when six police cars appeared in the street directly in front of our apartment. Then at last some one of us did notice, we all got up, glanced out the window, and then trailed back to the screen. The sight didn't register. The War was on. The next day I

discovered that the woman across the way — no more than fifty yards from our television — had shot and killed her husband. Reportedly she still had the gun in her hand when the police arrived. But we hadn't heard the shots. We hadn't heard a thing. Because we had the War on. The presence of the War pretty much emptied out everything around us.

That almost visceral illusion of presence is, of course, what makes much live television unusually compelling. What we see and hear seems immediate, seems unmediated, largely because of the effect of the instant. And of course it's anything but unmediated. It's just that the enormity of the process of mediation is invisible, at least from the vantage point of the couch: the infrastructures of the TV news systems, the vast capital expenditures, the complex, costly technology and the hundreds of decisions that have to have been made before any image can make its way to us in the full electronic flowering of the instantaneous. This kind of live television, much as I love it, can only produce a fetishizing of the moment.

This was the first war in history that everyone could turn off at night in order to sleep — and perchance to dream of all those smart bombs intelligently exploding in the stupid air — and then switch on again in the morning to know if the world had yet fallen to pieces. The knowledge that such television produces tends not to accumulate, in part because each new moment literally cancels, without a trace, what we have just seen. This experience of non-accumulation that TV affords us is of course the negation of the otherwise universal process occurring around us everyday, the otherwise inescapable process of capital accumulation. It is perhaps in this sense that television seems to offer an escape from the rest of everyday reality.

As if to corroborate some of these speculations, an interesting study by three University of Massachusetts professors, conducted toward the end of the war, concluded that the more television you watched, the fewer facts you were likely to know about the war, but the more likely you were to support it anyway. In the study, 250 randomly selected people in Denver were asked thirty questions over the telephone. One of the survey's designers, Sut Jhally, said,

"The study clearly indicates there is a relation between what people know and their attitudes toward the war. The media should understand that they aren't merely reporting the situation, they are also constantly helping to shape attitudes toward those events."

The numbing effect of hours of television-watching is obviously inimical to ordinary rationality. Isn't it possible that for many in the television audience, it is more desirable to be numb than to be informed? It's hard to see support of the war as anything but a form of numbness. Surely, the fulfillment of the common desire to be anesthetized is one of the primary functions of television. In this sense, one tunes in in order to tune out. The pioneers of virtual reality are certainly cognizant of this tendency. Anesthesia is a phenomenal form of non-accumulation. It's an odd contradiction: television, our represented experience, teaching us that nothing adds up, while our more direct apprehension of reality insists that nothing exists, including ourselves, unless it can be added to one stockpile or another. (We are all weapons in some arsenal.)

But within the air war's actual theater of operations, as opposed to the war theater

on the air in our operational living rooms, the sobriquet Nintendo War early on seemed more precise than Living Room War. By far the most crucial and most characteristic video of the war was the nintendo image the bomber pilots saw on the screens in front of them as they zeroed in on their targets. It was at the stage of the air war, in fact, that television coverage was most chilling. The network glorification of the smart new technology of war was so extreme, so unrelenting, and so cryptofascist that it was most reminiscent of the rabid hyperbole of the Italian Futurists.

Its idiom also evoked the jingoist jocksniffery of football announcers. The emphasis on numbers, names, and stats, on graphics, plays, and kicking ass, and later, on "cutting it off and killing it," in Cohn Powell's unstudied phrase, are all derived from the sports world, that sweaty utopia of repressed homoerotic ritual combat made up of grown-up males in uniforms whose entire livelihood is concentrated on their ability to use their fetishized bodies with the forceful precision of high-tech weapons. At one point Bush even called the war his Super Bowl.

Hold onto that notion of the football air war for a moment, so that lean balance the image of the gonzo pilot up there passionately pushing the buttons on his Nintendo-for-real with what may be the single most suggestive video image from the ground. The GIs, denied most of the customary exotic and sensual pleasures of being overseas because of their necessary adherence to the mores of their host country, Saudi Arabia, filled up most of their leisure time playing pocket-size video games, the favorite being nintendo's Game Boy (\$87.50 complete with headphones). Now imagine an endless desert landscape across which streak the flyboys madly techno-masturbating to their targets, and at the very same moment down amid the sand and the dust the lowboys in desert camo jerk and flip their fingers massaging the buttons on the high-tech toys in their laps until they can't bear it any longer. One Nintendo-addicted GI said, "When you sit and let your mind drift, then the bad thoughts come." Does the pathos of this statement help to account for the numbness, for the desire to empty one's mind, apparently so rampant at home and at war? Please, no more bad thoughts, game boy.

Now, still keeping in mind this search for numbness, consider the fact that "NFL, Films, in a joint venture with the U.S. Department of Defense, is compiling a highlight film" of Desert Storm "for release by late summer." You see, there is something to look forward to. I think, for example, that we can hope for some tasteful slo-mo instant replays of close ups of Iraqi footsoldiers' heads being blown off. But who knows? The president of NFL Films, Steve Sabol, says, "I don't want to say that war is the same as football." But surely, Steve, it can be shot with as much brio and just as many gut-wrenching action shots?

"Our talent as filmmakers can very easily be transferred to this sort of venture. [The military] like the way we have presented and mythologized pro football. The same spirit and ideology that football glorifies and inspires — discipline, devotion, commitment to a cause — is also the spirit necessary for a successful military endeavor."

Steve's references to the spiritual dimensions of war and football are especially moving. Half a million dollars has been spent on the film, already six months in the making, with footage from military cameras placed inside and out of aircraft and tanks.

"The video, which includes government-cleared footage of bombing missions and ground assaults on the Iraqi army, will be delivered to more than 700,000 Operation Desert Storm troops and their families."

Here at last is revealed the actual reason for all that censorship. It had little or nothing to do with protecting the lives of U.S. soldiers or the lives of the Allies. Why give away all that great footage, when you can sell it to the NFL? "The league also is negotiating with PBS, which is interested in using the footage as the basis for a 10-week series."

There are some alternatives to this new world order of television, in which the networks and the Pentagon march hand in hand across the gridiron of our consciousness. They are fragile and under-funded, and they lack game of the week glitz, however. The Gulf Crisis TV Project, a spin-off of the Deep Dish TV Network (itself a spin-off of Paper Tiger Television), aired four half-hour anti-war programs in January, and a second series of six programs beginning at the end of February on at least two hundred stations nationwide. The shows, used at teach-ins at college campuses, have also been seen in as many as fourteen countries, including Channel 4 in Britain. The wide-ranging material for these rough-edged energetic shows was supplied by several hundred producers, mostly from public access channels around the country. Covering such issues as anti-war protest, the history of U.S. foreign intervention, media collaboration with the war, and conscientious objection within the military, these programs critically subvert the mainstream's monopolistic one-way trickle of information. The Gulf Crisis TV Project, in taking advantage of relatively cheap satellite technology, like Deep Dish has in the past few years, suggests the potential for a full-time radical television network.

Shortly after Desert Storm began, our eight-year-old daughter conducted an informal poll among her classmates and was shocked to discover that she was the only person in her third-grade class to oppose the war. A week or so later she came home flushed and furious because her teacher had conscientiously characterized what our daughter recognized as wanton and horrific destruction as, instead, the noble effort of the U.S. to rescue poor little Kuwait. Her indignation was redoubled because she knew that in order to survive in that environment she would now be forced to choose self-censorship.

Each Sunday, as a member of the San Diego Peace Coalition's anti-war percussion band, she would chant and march and beat the drum. Each Monday, disguised as an ordinary U.S. schoolgirl, she would stand with the others and mumble invented gibberish as the class recited that idolatrous prayer known as the pledge of allegiance. This I Led Two Lives existence had the benefit, for her, of deepening her critique of what passes for public education in this country. Despite the duress of her split life, she continued throughout the war to make separate but equal successful commitments to both. Fortunately, the form of self-censorship she chose did not have to survive a long test. And there were in fact certain signs of leakage, even so: allowed each week a few spelling words of her own choice, she began picking "patriot" and "scud" and "Saudi Arabia,"

I would hope and suspect that her experience of segregation, perhaps only as short-lived as the war itself, but sharp and intense, would enliven her sense of contradiction and difference. This while the rest of her classmates were presumably

engulfed in the purified waters of patriotism. It would seem nevertheless that the private project of self-censorship which all adults must negotiate on a daily basis (with all the attendant intimate consequences of embarrassment, regimentation of honesty, humiliation, suppressed anger, the desire or fear to hurt another's "feelings," etc.) could only soften our acceptance of the public representation of censorship. She, however, loudly denouncing our President any chance she got, was too tough to invite the Pentagon into her heart.

[To top](#) [Current issue](#) [Archived essays](#) [Jump Cut home](#)

The Ploughman's Lunch Remembering or forgetting history

by Tony Williams

from *Jump Cut*, no. 36, May 1991, pp. 11-18

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"If we leave the remembering to historians then the struggle is already lost. Everyone must have a memory, everyone needs to be a historian. In this country, for example, were in danger of losing hard-won freedoms by dozing off into a perpetual present."

— Ann Barrington in *THE PLOUGHMAN'S LUNCH*. [1]

[\[open notes in new window\]](#)

"If this is tomorrow's generation, then Britain has little to fear in the years to come."

— Margaret Thatcher, 1982 Conservative Party Conference

Since Thatcher's 1979 election victory, the 80s have witnessed an overwhelming assault on British social, political, and cultural life. A right-wing Conservative Government currently attempts to erase all historical memory of working class struggles. Its ideological strategy is to move national consciousness towards social darwinist "Victorian values," 80s and 90s Britain is a world of fortified class barriers, excessive racism, assault on the poor, indirect economic dismantling of the Health Service, interference with state education, increased powers of censorship, and political attacks on minority groups such as gay and lesbian centers funded by local councils.

To succeed in this ideological offensive, changes in historical consciousness are essential. The commercially successful *CHARIOTS OF FIRE* provided an initial inspiration. It contained nostalgic echoes of Britain's imperial past, anticipating the Falklands War.[2] Other examples followed such as *THE JEWEL IN THE CROWN*, *A PASSAGE TO INDIA*, and *GANDHI*, all favorably revising Britain's legacy of colonial oppression.[3]

This was not a uniform image of British cinema. Leaving aside Bill Forsyth's recreations of Ealing comedy eccentricity, other films presented a divided vision — whether in the thriller genre (*DEFENCE OF THE REALM*, *THE WHISTLE BLOWER* and *THE FOURTH PROTOCOL*), the screen work of David Hare (*PLENTY*, *WETHERBY*) or the 80s version of the 1956-63 "kitchen-sink" realist movie (*LETTER TO BREZHNEV*, *MY BEAUTIFUL LAUNDRETTE*).[4]

However three films echoed the decade's predominant fear. 1984 was the year of George Orwell's 1948 warning to a future generation about the dangers of historical revisionism and cultural betrayal. Michael Radford's reverential film version eschewed the futuristic trappings of the earlier 1954 version to present a society that had not materialistically advanced since Britain's postwar austerity period. Gilliam's *BRAZIL* portrayed a futuristic (or parallel-world) society having no historical knowledge. The main characters were politically impotent and lost in pre-Oedipal fantasies.[5]

THE PLOUGHMAN'S LUNCH (1983) featured *BRAZIL*'s leading actor (Jonathan Pryce) but was set in 1982's recognizable present — the time of the Falklands Conflict. Of the three films, it presented the most relevant picture of British society undergoing drastic change. Writer Ian McEwan and director Richard Eyre wished to echo the style of European films dealing with authoritarian societies such as *Tim GERMEN SISTERS* and *MAN OF IRON* in their collaborative venture (Johnston, 105). The film's general release was held up until after the 1983 election. It drew uncomfortable parallels between government and personal betrayals and showed history cynically rewritten for political ends. *THE PLOUGHMAN'S LUNCH* did not gain popular success. It offered an uncomfortable picture of contemporary England and had no sympathetic characters. Instead McEwan and Eyre aimed at a quasi-modernist, political satire where character identification would be nonexistent (Johnston, 108).

Shot in a familiar realist, literate style, *THE PLOUGHMAN'S LUNCH* presents a distanced, ironic version of those late 50s British upward mobility films whose most appropriate progenitor is Jack Clayton's (1959) *ROOM AT THE TOP*. [6] Laurence Harvey's Joe Lampton seeks upward mobility through the boss's daughter, Susan. In *THE PLOUGHMAN'S LUNCH*, his 80s descendent, James Penfield (Jonathan Pryce) emerges from the same lower middleclass origins as Margaret Thatcher, the Grantham grocer's daughter.

James's father owns a similar shop. Like Margaret Thatcher, James escapes his class origins by attending a grammar school and entering Oxford. This gives him entry as a news editor into the BBC's upper-middle class environment. James has political and personal ambitions. He is writing a revisionist, historical best seller about the 1956 Suez crisis — which had split 50s British society as Vietnam did 60s United States. He also has romantic designs on upper-class Susan Barrington. Her first name reminds us of Joe Lampton's desirable Susan in *ROOM AT THE TOP*. However, this Susan is much more manipulative and unfeeling than her prototype. After James has neglected his dying mother while rejecting his class origins, Susan and his best friend, Jeremy (Tim Curry) betray James in a sexual and class alliance at the 1982 Conservative Party Conference. And it is at this conference that we hear Thatcher spout false, outmoded, Churchillian rhetoric about her Falklands victory.

The original ending to *THE PLOUGHMAN'S LUNCH* had James and his publisher toasting the revisionist history's successful completion. The film now ends with a freeze-frame of James at his mother's funeral service, impatiently looking at his watch and anxious to move on. The film unites its political and personal critique. A political chameleon wanted to rewrite the past. He denies his class origins. The climax presents him frozen in time — an appropriate visual punishment for his historical and cultural betrayals.

Two important components are crucial in understanding THE PLOUGHMAN'S LUNCH in the British narrative tradition: Suez's historical significance in British society and cultural representations involving popular memory.

On July 26th, 1956, President Nasser nationalized the French/English-owned Suez Canal. This move upset the two colonial powers. Britain had lost its empire after WWII, delayed granting independence to former colonies, and fought for its hold on Cyprus. France also struggled to keep Algeria as a colony. Unless countered, Nasser's action would inspire third-world liberation movements, Britain, France and Israel secretly arranged to regain control of the Canal, Israel would attack Egypt across the Sinai Peninsula. Britain and France would then intervene and order "both sides" to withdraw. The two powers could then seize control of the Canal on the pretext of saving it from damage. All sides then moved against Egypt.

This whole strategy was deceitful. The British Government misinformed friendly Arab nations and its U.S. ally about the operation. It also lied to Parliament and the people. When the U.S. learned the truth, it ordered Britain out of the area. As a result of United Nations' and world governments' condemnation, France and Britain withdrew in humiliation. Churchill's successor, Prime Minister Anthony Eden, resigned from office and Britain became as divided as the United States was during the Vietnam War.[7]

Nearly three decades later, the Falklands War reversed widespread popular disillusionment against Thatcher's Conservative Government's first term. Unemployment was above three million, economic policies were failing, and another recession was approaching. Even before the actual invasion, the British government knew of Argentine plans. It used the Falklands issue as an ideological weapon to reinforce anachronistic feelings of patriotism and national sentiment. The United States followed this strategy in its later attacks against Grenada and Libya.

Britain originally seized the Falkland Islands (called Malvinas in Argentina) in 1832. But prior to 1982, successive British governments had negotiated with Argentina to restore the islands so as to obtain more positive political relationships. Britain had no special military or economic interest in the islands. They were maintained by absentee landlords in a near feudal state of dependency and suffered from under-investment and inadequate government. For Argentina recovery of the islands was a matter of national pride.[8]

Before the invasion British politicians cared little about the islands or their inhabitants. Once the Argentines invaded, the government and media engaged in a barrage of patriotic and racist polemic that found its lowest level in Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* newspaper. The *Sun* greeted the illegal sinking of the Argentine Belgrano cruiser (sailing back home outside the British exclusion zone) with the headline, "Gotcha!" It also vilified slaughtered Argentine conscripts as "Argies." The war became a deceitful propaganda device, similar to its Suez predecessor. But now it succeeded in stage-managing an imaginary postwar ideology of a "united Britain" among the general population."9" As Anthony Barnett points out,

"There were no [British] interests involved, it was purely a matter of spirit, Britain's 'standing' in the world was at stake. Nothing real was being contested, therefore that most dangerously unreal aspect of

international relations was at risk, the very aura of sovereignty itself, the sacred cow of the world order *credibility*."[10]

Thatcher's attitude to the "rescued" Falkland Island inhabitants was one of contempt. Immediately after the conflict, Parliament refused the inhabitants British citizenship!

Britain's general population lacked the historical memory that could have countered such ideological manipulation. Further government oppression followed. Rightwing interests questioned history teaching in schools. Education became reorganized. Assaults began on any possible oppositional groups — leftist, feminist or gay — who would challenge the status quo. Many former liberals and leftists were quick to jump on the Thatcherite bandwagon, particularly those who had benefited from the educational reforms and social welfare policies of the postwar Labor Government. The character of James Penfield exemplifies this type of former liberal.

THE PLOUGHMAN'S LUNCH argues that without commitment to past working-class struggles Orwell's *1984* warning will become a present reality.[11] This message is always present at the margins of the film's discourse. The film was written by a screenwriter who refused the "convention of rounded, complex characters" so as to assert more broadly political themes (Johnston, 107). Its manner of statement resembles that textual "essential absence" noted by Pierre Machery in *A Theory of Literary Production*:

"...the work exists above all by its determinate absences, by what it does not say, in its relation to what it is not. Not that it can conceal anything: this meaning is not buried in its depths, masked or disguised; it is not a question of hunting it down with interpretations. It is not in the work but by its side: on its margins, at that limit where it ceases to be what it claims to be because it has reached back to the very conditions of its possibility. It is then no longer constituted by a factitious necessity, the product of a conscious or unconscious intention."[12]

This is similar to Sheila Johnston's observations about the film:

"A moral position is to be sought, then, somewhere in the interstices between the characters, the silence between their voices, rather than in anything that is actually said. The film works on the principles, not of harmony, but of cacophany, not consensus but dissent. So Mrs. Thatcher's 'spirit of the South Atlantic' speech, with its paen to national unity and resolve — the resolute approach — is placed against the faintly echoing chant of spectators outside the hall and Penfield's confrontation with his perfidious friend inside." (Johnston, 108)

Alexander Walker sees THE PLOUGHMAN'S LUNCH's relation to *1984* in its

"same basic fear of living in a society that re-wrote the past in terms of the present. The multi-cubicked scribes in Orwell's bureaucracy pasted the approved versions of history into the Party scrapbook: the media smoothies in the Eyre-McEwan picture re-wrote the past for their own advancement in the power game. Each film presented a different

perspective, but it was of the same view — a Britain becoming ever more subordinate to the authoritarian view of things.[11]

To properly assess the significance of THE PLOUGHMAN'S LUNCH, we must relate it to one significant British cultural tradition. There is an ideologically forceful narrative theme crossing several generations. The protagonist is usually a hero from a lower class background, alienated from his roots, and powerless to change society. Pip's moral isolation from Joe Gargery in *Great Expectations*, H.G. Wells' inability to understand Parsons' politics in *The History of Mr. Potty* (1909), Robert Tressell's "Ragged Trousered Philanthropists" are all historically significant literary examples of England's lack of radical alternatives bemoaned by Marx and Engels. "Working-class" plays from 1916 such as *Hindle Wakes* and *Hobson's Choice* eliminated class conflict and stressed knowing one's place in society. Both plays were later filmed in the culturally stagnant era of the early 50s.

The Suez-influenced "Angry Young Man" movement in theater supposedly offered a protest against postwar malaise. It took its name from John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* (1956). Reviewers believed Osborn's Jimmy Porter to have a particular contemporary significance:

"Jimmy was taken to be speaking for a whole generation, of which he and his creator were among the most precocious representatives, since it was essentially the postwar generation. They represented those who like Lindsay Anderson 'nailed a red flag to the roof of the mess at the fort of Annan Parbat' to celebrate the return of a Labor government in 1945 and then gradually became disillusioned when a brave new world failed to materialize." [14]

Jimmy had supposed leftist leanings. But the play refutes this. Jimmy marries upper-class Allison, anticipating the sexual/class pursuits of Joe Lampton and James Penfield. But he gains no change in social position. Constantly abusing Allison, Jimmy secretly admires his father-in-law, Colonel Redfern. The stage directions reveal both Jimmy (and author Osborne's) real attitude: "Forty years of being a soldier sometimes conceal the essentially gentle, kindly man underneath." [15] Jimmy secretly yearns to be a member of the establishment. But rigid class barriers prevent this. Jimmy sees himself as a "rebel without a cause." He says,

"I suppose people of our generation aren't able to die for good causes any longer. We had all that done for us in the thirties and forties when we were still kids. There aren't any brave causes left." (Osborne, 84)

Jimmy is alienated, lacking any knowledge of past working-class struggles and totally ignorant of fifties political movements (anti-nuclear, anti-Cold war) that he could have aligned himself with. Alienated individualism characterizes both THE PLOUGHMAN'S LUNCH and its antecedents in film, theater and television. Although there are exceptions — such as the work of Ken Loach and Tony Garnett as well as Trotskyist playwright Jim Allen — ahistorical, romantic alienation functions as an overwhelming force in Britain's cultural tradition.

Despite 50s playwright Arnold Wesker's working-class cultural education [16], post-Suez protest took the form of a kitchen-sink movement in theater and film. Working-class heroes of LOOK BACK IN ANGER, SATURDAY NIGHT AND

SUNDAY MORNING, THE LONELINESS OF THE LONG DISTANCE RUNNER, and THIS SPORTING LIFE were free so wench, booze and rage against their respective environments. But the films never posited any possibility of radical change in alliance with past historical political movements. If he were not destroyed by the system in real life, an alienated hero could always descend into a fantasy world, as did Tom Courtney in BRAZIL's 1963 predecessor, BILLY LIAR. Chris Auty aptly described this movement as. "Protest, not protest It is *alienation* — not Marxist but misogynist." [17]

David Mercer's 60s television plays also displayed alienated, ahistorical pessimism. [18] His two trilogies—THE GENERATIONS and ON THE EVE OF PUBLICATION — presented familiar images of conflicting, despairing, working class fathers and disappointing, upwardly mobile offspring. The works denied any possibility of historical continuity between earlier class struggles and those of contemporary society. WHERE THE DIFFERENCE BEGINS — the first play of THE GENERATIONS — anticipated one plot element of THE PLOUGHMAN'S LUNCH. Two sons, an alienated intellectual and an upwardly mobile bourgeois (who would later be conflated in James Penfield) return to their working-class father's home where their mother is dying. The play contrasts the father, a survivor of an earlier generation of struggles, with his unworthy 60s offspring. Despite the latter materially benefiting from the former's past struggles, the play documents the betrayal of the earlier generation's hopes and aspirations. As in Mercer's later play, ON THE EVE OF PUBLICATION, the 30s proletariat are a dying breed, whose utopian vision of a better socialist world is now cruelly irrelevant.

WHERE THE DIFFERENCE BEGINS cast vaudeville comedian, Hylda Baker, as the old wife Bernie. This represents a particular British casting tradition whereby representatives of a now defunct mode of working-class entertainment portray elderly or middle-aged working-class characters. The redundant world of the actors' former success is clearly meant to parallel the older working-class generation's anachronism in the modern world. This device is significant in understanding THE PLOUGHMAN'S LUNCH's use of former music hall comedians, Nat Jackley and Pearl Hackney in the roles of James Penfield's father and mother.

Mercer's final teleplay in THE GENERATION trilogy, BIRTH OF A PRIVATE MAN, focuses on the alienated, anti-nuclear protester figure of the grandson, Colin Waring (played by filmmaker Tony Garnett). Colin has retreated into insanity away from his grandfather's political legacy, the Committee of 100, the late-1950s radical wing of Britain's anti-nuclear movement (dramatist Mercer had belonged to this organization). Cohn's working-class girlfriend, Linda, is critical of his inability to link up with the working-class. Cohn eventually dies as a 'private man' enacting an impotent gesture on the Berlin Wall.

By the time of this play, Mercer saw only futility in political action. In an appendix to THE GENERATIONS, television director Don Taylor condescendingly defended Mercer's alienation from earlier British class-conscious struggles. Taylor recognized their moral vision but held that their "*simple belief* is impossible in a complex social situation" (italics mine), despite acknowledging Colin Waring's "cancer of nihilistic despair." [19]

Mercer's second trilogy dealt with the failed, alcoholic, angst-ridden Marxist writer

Robert Kelvin, who has betrayed both his political ideals and class background. *THE CELLAR AND THE ALMOND TREE* presented his political alter ego-Czech Marxist, Sladek (Peter Vaughn). Despite torture by Nazis and Stalinists, Sladek has remained true to his past ideals. The final play of this trilogy, *EMMA'S TIME*, ended positively. After Kelvin's death, his young mistress (Michele Dotrice) and Sladek collaborate in writing a history of the Czech Communist Party. The older and younger generations will thus salvage Kelvin's betrayed legacy. Using documentary footage of 20s Russia such as Lenin's funeral, intercutting scenes of young Kelvin with his working-class parents, *EMMA'S TIME* contrasts contemporary political powerlessness with the historical events that had inspired an earlier generation. That work formed one isolated valuable lesson in showing how past historical lessons could inspire the next generation.

THE PLOUGHMAN'S LUNCH presents a vision of a society seeking to destroy those inspirational historical lessons. History is rewritten for totalitarian ends. The film is the culmination of those negative roots within Britain's cultural tradition. Orwell's *1984* is now more applicable to a British media-dominated authoritarian rightwing society rather than to any supposed leftwing totalitarian dictatorship.

In his introduction to the published screenplay of *THE PLOUGHMAN'S LUNCH*, Ian McEwan mentions two significant influences: E.P Thompson's *Reading by Candlelight* and Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. Author of *The Poverty of Theory* and *The Making of the English Working Class*, Thompson severely criticized Althusserian Marxism's negative influence upon a trendy English intellectual establishment. Althusser's revisionist platform in works such as *Reading Capital* elevated theory over practice in isolation from everyday class struggle.[20] *THE PLOUGHMAN'S LUNCH* hints at James's possible former involvement in this Althusserian movement. A copy of *Capital* lies among a pile of books propping up his telephone.

Milan Kundera's relevance is noted by McEwan: "I thought our subject might encompass the uses we make of the past, and the dangers, to an individual as well as to a nation of living without a sense of history." In the film, Ann quotes Kundera as having "one of his characters say that the struggle of man against tyranny is the struggle of memory against forgetting" (McEwan, 18). It is one in which James Penfield will not participate. His individual rewriting of the Suez crisis parallels the government's version of the Falklands invasion, involving betrayal and deceit.

The film's title offer an appropriate metaphor for its content. A Ploughman's Lunch is a popular English pub snack but was never historical, As television advertising director, Matthew Fox, tells James, it was a "completely successful fabrication of the past," a media strategy to attempt to persuade people to eat in pubs. This culinary manipulation thus parallels Thatcher's successful stage management of Churchillian ideology during the Falklands campaign (McEwan, vi).

In the film's first sequence a BBC radio newsroom teleprinter announces the British task force's sailing to South Georgia. Later program announcements foreshadow the film's major themes of England's narcissistic investment in past glories and historical distortion.

"Commander Freddy Bracknell will be talking about his four years as a German POW in Stalag Three, and mountaineer John Clayton will be

reliving the thrills and perils of Everest. Also Polly Morrell will be finding out from the historian Professor John Gerty how the governments of Eastern Europe distort their recent past in history books to suit their present policies and allegiances."

Ironically, James engages in this kind of distortion with his proposed revisionist history of the Suez crisis. It appeals to rightwing British and U.S. interests. At a publishing house party, James's upper-class friend Jeremy comments on the politics of the exclusively white guests:

"Some social democrats. Some diligent anti-communists. A Political Section man from the U.S. Embassy. And this exquisite Californian wine, courtesy of the CIA."

James's publisher, Gold, speaks to a group of graduate trainees about market forces determining publications. "I don't think anybody should be allowed to get a book published unless it sells at a supermarket." U.S. finance capitalism is clearly dominating British cultural life.

Lunching with Gold at an expensive restaurant, James sells him the idea of a revisionist history of the Suez Crisis. Its market will be the conservative growth area of Twentieth Century Studies. James reinterprets the Suez humiliation in terms similar to 80s historical revisionism describing Vietnam as the "noble crusade." Presenting the United States as the "good ally...who tells you when to pull back," James manufactures his intellectual commodity in the new British conservative spirit engendered by the Falklands campaign. He assures Gold that he is no socialist. Gold cautions him about the freshman and sophomore college audience's reading level:

"So your language will have to be simple, not stupid, mind, but simple, very, very simple, and always reimember it's an American readership."

The white, upper-middle-class composition of the publisher's party contrasts with scenes showing James traveling to work on the Brixton Underground. Brixton is a prominently black working-class district now populated by Afro-Caribbean descendents of those late 40s immigrants lured to England to undertake low-paid, non-skilled work. On the underground James sits uneasily next to a black. On his way to the BBC he passes a black streetcleaner. James owns an apartment in Brixton. He belongs to the new yuppie generation now pricing the original inhabitants out of the area.

James has romantic feelings towards television researcher, Susan Barrington. Although she is the daughter of a leftwing historian and a deceased BBC executive who resigned in protest against the Conservative Government's attempted manipulation of the Suez Crisis, Susan is ruthlessly opportunistic. As the screenplay states, she is a product of her class:

"Flamboyant, effortlessly confident, she inhabits that special world — with its different rules — of the truly ambitious. James's fascination owes as much to the certainties of her class as to her looks" (MeEwan, 3).

Susan has left the women's movement after unscrupulously using it for her own professional advancement:

"I mean, in many ways I'm right behind the women's movement. But sometimes I wish they'd get on with it instead of moaning on. The office was split right down the middle. I mean, as a *woman* I understood what they were saying, that current affairs was all about what men did, but as a human *being* and a *television* researcher as a *professional*, I could just sense they'd got it all wrong. I could see that there were two paths I could go down, power or not power. Down the not-power path was lots of sisterly feeling, masochism and frustration. Down the other path, I could keep on working. So of course I voted with the men and the other women all resigned. I think they're mad, don't you?" (McEwan, 4)

James continues his odyssey of lies denying that his parents are alive. Selecting four minutes of edited material from an hour of complex archive information, Susan has no research interest in the past. "I don't like flashbacks. They make me feel as though I'm holding my breath. I like progress."

Throughout the film, the mise-en-scene surrounds upper-middle-class life with signifiers of sterility and artificiality. James takes Susan to the Barbican Art Gallery — an upper-middleclass ghetto with pretentious paintings "representing various forms of aesthetic self-consciousness" (McEwan, 8). While visiting a Polytechnic James finds the students engaged in Space Invader machines instead of the political protest that occupied their late 60s predecessors.

A history professor at the Polytechnic tells James the real reasons for the Suez invasion that mirrored the British Falklands expedition — ideological manipulation, racism, and political deceit. These are factors James will ignore in his history. James then travels to Norfolk to meet Susan's mother, Ann, in order to gain access to her Suez archives. A former leftwing historian remarried to a television commercials director, Matthew Fox, she now lives in genteel retirement. James meets her husband's ten-year old son — the ideal product of Thatcherite educational policies — who can recite a list of English monarchs parrot-fashion. When James queries the missing Cromwells, the child Tom dismisses this seventeenth century revolutionary aspect of British history: "They don't count."

Misrepresenting himself to Ann as a socialist, James succeeds in gaining access to her files. Ann is no real judge of character, "You're a responsible journalist doing...a very demanding job. Every day you take decisions that depend on your sense of history. A genuine tyranny would have to get rid of people like you," On the way home, his car tire bursts. A recorded tape of his interview with the history professor plays on his car radio. It contradicts Ann's judgment as it shows James's intellectual deceit to be no individual matter.

"Perhaps we should reverse the question and ask ourselves to what extent individuals behave like governments, who are bound to act in the national interest which in turn is rarely separable from the government's interest, or that of the class it represents."

On his way to find a jack, James accidentally stumbles into a Woman's Peace Camp (clearly modeled on Greenham Common) protesting against U.S. nuclear missiles in England. Unlike Jimmy Porter, James has "good, brave causes left" with which he could identify. So could Ann who admits that she has retired from politics to leave the struggle to others. But James will choose misrepresentation and decide to ignore present realities. Ann narcissistically idealizes James after her dead brother. She nostalgically lives in the past, the former "brave new world" of the 1945 Labour Government. Thus Ann chooses to ignore the women's peace camp on her estate's doorstep. When she first seduces James, a jet fighter flies overhead — clearly armed with U.S. missiles — an ironic comment on her selfish preoccupations.

On his second visit James meets Polish historian Jacek. Jacek comments on British lack of historical memory. In contrast to Tom's list of English monarchs and Matthew's television commercial involving kings and queens, he speaks of Poland's more subversive historical memories.

"Here you have enviable freedoms, and yet no monuments to those who struggled to win them for you- Now that is why I think there is hope for the Poles, whoever occupies their country. They remember their dates, and they keep adding to them. December 1981, Gdansk 1980, 1976. 1970. Katyn 1940, 1922 and so on. It's a subversive list. Say it out loud on the streets of Warsaw and you might get arrested."

Frustrated in his attempts to woo Susan, James falls victim to her mother Ann's romantic fantasies. In their historical discussions Ann speaks of 1945's lost hopes. This was the period of the post-war Labour Government when Evelyn Waugh (of *Brideshead Revisited*) spoke of the country being under "enemy occupation." Her descriptions uneasily echo Thatcher's Britain:

"A small minority thought that England was really theirs, they had made it, they owned it. The rest, the wage earners, were foreigners, the outsiders intent on wrecking it all."

After he gains access to Ann's archives, James eventually discards her. Yet James will soon suffer the same fate. Before this class betrayal happens, he watches Matthew Fox's television commercial. This sequence acutely illustrates the advertising media's ideological distortions of history and gender roles. In a studio set James sees a "deeply contented pre-war middle-class sitting room." It resembles Margaret Thatcher's imaginary thirties world where the real historical issues of poverty, unemployment and economic depression are absent. Inside the sitting room is a "typical family," a key ideological construction in her platform of Victorian-derived middle class values.[21] The screenplay succinctly describes patriarchally proscribed rigid family stereotypes:

"Dad sits in an armchair reading a newspaper. A pipe is near at hand. To one side, a wireless. At his feet, a girl plays with a doll; a boy plays with a model steam engine. Mum enters with a tray of steaming hot drinks. As she sets down the tray on the arm of Dad's chair, the music peaks and the children half rise and arrange themselves on either side of Dad's legs. Everyone smiles up at Mum" (McEwan, 29).

Traveling with Susan and Jeremy to the national Conservative Party Conference, James witnesses his own personal betrayal. Susan and Jeremy are "old allies" who both socially and sexually screw James. During this humiliation, Thatcher announces the Falklands Victory. Her ideological distortion of present history echoes James's rewriting of the past.

Unlike Joe Lampton, James fails to obtain his "room at the top." The new, rigid, 80s class barriers will not allow him entry. The final image shows James in a freeze frame optical zoom. Impatiently glancing at his watch during his mother's funeral, unobserved by his grief-stricken father, James becomes frozen in a petrified ahistorical frame. It is an appropriate punishment for his complicity in the political distortions and cultural betrayals that characterize 80s England. The final scene mirrors Britain's contemporary stagnant condition. Unless there is concerted radical opposition toward authoritarian revising past history, especially memory of the struggles that reversed the working-class impoverishment noted by Engels in 1844, Britain is condemned to historical petrification. *THE PLOUGHMAN'S LUNCH* has thus a crucial contemporary relevance in the current moribund world of British cinema that concentrates primarily on imperial nostalgia and escapist fantasy.

NOTES

1. Ian McEwan, *THE PLOUGHMAN'S LUNCH* (London: Methuen, 1985), 18. All future quotations are from the published screenplay.
2. On the reactionary ideology and historical revisionism behind *CHARIOTS OF FIRE*, see Ed Carter, *CHARIOTS OF FIRE: Traditional Values/False History*" *JUMP CUT* 28 (1983), 14-17; see also John Walker, *The Once and Future Film* (London: Madmen 1985), 121; Sheila Johnston, "Charioteers and Ploughmen," and Martin Auty & Nick Roddick (eds.) *British Cinema Now* (London: British Film Institute, 1985), 99-104.
3. See the incisive critique by Saloon Rushdie, "Outside the Whale," *American Film* 10.4 (January-February 1985), 70. On *GANDHI*, see Udayan Gupta, "GANDHI," *Cineaste* 12.4 (1985), 46.
4. See John Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956-1963* (London: British Film Institute 1986).
5. The parallels between Orwell's *1984* and *BRAZIL* will be the subject of my forthcoming review in *Orwelliana* (the George Orwell Newsletter), For a comparison of Radford's and Gilliam's visions, see John Hutton, "1984 and *BRAZIL*: Nightmares, Old and New," *JUMP CUT* 32 (1987), 5-7, 14.
6. For a critical attack on *ROOM AT THE TOP* as representative of the acclaimed British "New Wave," see R. Barton Palmer, "What Was New in the British New Wave: Reviewing *ROOM AT THE TOP*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 14.3 (Fall 1986). 125-135,
7. I wish to express my thanks to graduate student, Dane Thompson, for allowing me to refer to his paper, "A Mixed Message: Some Images of Britain in Films of the 1980s" for this historical information. Relevant sources include Anthony Nutting,

No End of A Lesson (London; Constable 1967); Anthony Moncrieff, *Suez — Ten Years After* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1967), 107-116; and Roy Fullick and Geoffrey Powell, *Suez: The Double War* (London: Hamish Hamilton Ltd., 1979).

8. See Latin American Bureau, *Falklands/Malvinas: Whose Crisis?* (London: Latin American Bureau, 1982), 11.

9. On the Falkland Conflict's political significance see the special "War in the Falklands" issue of *New Left Review* 34 (July-August 1982), especially Anthony Barnett's article "Iron Britannia, 6-7, on the ideological uses of propaganda. See also Paul Foot, "How the Peace Was Torpedoed," *New Statesman* 105 (May 13, 1983), 8-10. Foot speculates as to whether or not the sinking was a deliberate attempt to sabotage the peace talks beginning in Washington. For the ideological use of World War II imagery in the affair, see Geoff Hurd (ed). *National Fictions: World War Two in British Films and Television* (London: BFI, 1984),

10. Anthony Barnett, *Iron Britannia* (London: Allison & Busby, 1982), 22.

11. For a trenchant criticism of 80s leftist retreat from socialist positions, see Ralph Miliband, "The New Revisionism in Britain," *New Left Review* 150 (March-April 1985). 5-26.

12. Quoted by John Caughie (ed), *Theories of Authorship* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 193.

13. Alexander Walker, *National Heroes: British Cinema in the Seventies and Eighties* (London: Harrap, 1985), 265, For Thatcher's particular brand of authoritarianism, see the 1984-85 *New Left Review* debates centering around her "authoritarian populism" appeal. See also Stuart Hall and Marlin Jacques, *The Politics of Thatcherism* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1983). For the similarity of Thatcher's policies to Reaganomics, see Russell Lewis, *Margaret Thatcher: A Personal and Political Biography* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul. 1978), 176, For an overall picture of Thatcher's first term, see Jock Bruce-Gardyne, *Mrs. Thatcher's First Administration* (London: Macmillan, 1984. Again, I'm grateful to Dane Thompson for these references.

14. John Russell Taylor, *Anger and After* (London: Methuen, 1962). 40,

15. John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* (New York: Criterion Books, 1957), 63.

16. For an early survey of this now-neglected figure in British cultural life, see Harold U. Ribalow, *Arnold Wesker* (New York: Twayne, 1965). Wesker's work attempted to unite themes of the historical past and contemporary political consciousness in his first trilogy of plays dealing with a Jewish working-class family — *Chicken Soup with Barley* (1951), *Roots* (1959), and *I'm Talking About Jerusalem* (1960). His 1962 play, *Chips with Everything*, dealt with the failed efforts of upper-class National Serviceman Pip (named conspicuously after the hero of *Great Expectations*) to cross class boundaries. Both the military class system and ignorant working-class prejudices destroy Pip.

17. Chris, Auty, "Crises, Revivals and Revolts...dreaming of the British Cinema",

18. Mercer later wrote screenplays such as MORGAN — A SUITABLE CASE FOR TREATMENT (1966) adapted from his original television play, now destroyed by the BBC. See *THE GENERATIONS: A Trilogy of Plays* (London: John Calder 1964) for WHERE THE DIFFERENCE BEGINS (1961), A CLIMATE OF FEAR (1962) and BIRTH OF A PRIVATE MAN; and ON THE EVE OF PUBLICATION (London: Methuen 1970) for ON THE EVE OF PUBLICATION (1968). THE CELLAR AND THE ALMOND TREE and EMMA'S TIME (both 1970).

19. Don Taylor, "David Mercer's Television Drama," *THE GENERATIONS*, 262.

20. For relevant criticisms see Frederic Jameson, *The Prison House of Language* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 106-109; Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London, New Left Books, 1976) and *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* (London: Verso, 1983); Terry Lovell, *Pictures of Reality: Aesthetics, Politics and Pleasure* (London: BFI, 1980), 29-47; Sebastiano Timpanaro, *On Materialism* (London: Verso, 1980), 64-68, 74-78, 192-196; and Simon Clarke and others, *One Dimensional Marxism: Althusser and the Politics of Culture* (London: Allison and Busby. 1980).

21. See *The History Workshop Group* presentation, "Victorian Values," special supplement in *The New Statesman* 105 (May 27th 1983), i-xvi. Again we must remember the Conservative Government and Rupert-Murdoch-owned-press attack on the Labour Party as the "anti-traditional family," champion of gays, lesbians, blacks and one-parent families during the mid-80.

War looking at film looking at war

by Kali Tal

from *Jump Cut*, no. 36, May 1991, pp. 19-24

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Over the last five or six years I have read some 250 Vietnam novels by veterans and combat journalists. I have also worked with and talked with scores of Vietnam veterans. And at some point, several years ago, I became aware of the importance of John Wayne. Not John Wayne, the film actor, or John Wayne, the man, or even John Wayne, the image. No, what I became aware of was John Wayne, the story: the narrative strategy responsible for the deaths of thousands of nineteen- and twenty-year-old boys in Vietnam.

In 1960 Delbert Mann was shooting *THE OUTSIDER* at Camp Pendleton. He asked a group of Marine recruits to tell him why they joined the Marines. "Half of them answered that it was because of the John Wayne films that they had seen." [1] [\[open notes in new window\]](#) Every one of the Vietnam novels and narratives I have read mentions John Wayne and/or the film *THE SANDS OF IWO JIMA*. The reference is always bitter, ironic or angry. "John Wayne" became a verb in Vietnam: a term applied to the actions of men who foolishly exposed themselves or others to danger for the sake of that ambiguous term "glory" or that even more ambiguous term "honor." ("John Wayne" was also grunt terminology for the standard issue P-38 can opener used on C-rations — make of that what you will), Michael Herr confesses in a 1983 *Esquire* article,

"I keep thinking about all the kids who got wiped out by seventeen years of war movies before coming to Vietnam to get wiped out for good. You don't know what a media freak is until you've seen the way a few of those Grunts would run around during a light when they knew that there was a television crew nearby; they were actually making war movies in their heads, doing little Guts and Glory Leatherneck lap dances under fire, getting their pimples shot off for the networks." [2]

And Charles Durden, another correspondent, has written a novel in which the main character, Private Hawkins, wonders what would happen if all the men in his company refused their orders to Vietnam and went back to bed. "No way," he concludes:

"We'd all seen too many John Wayne movies. Jesus, what he coulda done for the anti-war movement if he'd spent only half his time hockin' up that drawl to say fine things like 'Fuck you, Cap'n. If these little Jap bastards want this island so bad, they can have it. I'm hitchin' me a ride

back to the fleet.' With that he throws down his flamethrower 'n' wades into the surf. Fat chance.”[3]

My thesis is that film shaped soldiers' expectations about their Vietnam experience, and influenced their actions while they were in Vietnam. Life and death decisions were made based on film images, and the consequences could frequently be wounding or death. The devastating effects of their betrayal by the film medium brought about a deep ambivalence toward film in Vietnam War veterans. Further, film has become an acknowledged weapon in the battle over who owns the narrative rights to the Vietnam War. Hayden White says that it is in narrative

“...that our desire for the imaginary, the possible, must contest with the imperatives of the real, the actual. If we view narration and narrativity, as the instruments by which the conflicting claims of the imaginary and the real are mediated, arbitrated, or resolved in a discourse, we begin to comprehend both the appeal of narrative and the grounds for refusing it.”[4]

Film critic James Roy MacBean has asserted that the practice of "ignoring the spectator" in bourgeois cinema creates the illusion that the film is a "reflection of reality," at the same time that it plays on the audience's emotions and exploits the viewer's

"identification-projection mechanisms in order to induce him, subtly, insidiously, unconsciously, to participate in the dreams and fantasies that are marketed by bourgeois capitalist society."

John Gardner explains that instruction is the root function of art,

"whether or not we notice the instruction or approve of it. Not just occasionally, but invariably [filmmakers] set up models intended to be imitated and either slyly or blatantly give the reader instruction..."[6]

Soldiers adopted the models created for them in films, and relied on films to provide them with the tools to deal with the real war. We can begin to understand the importance of this process by examining the prevalence of film images in narratives by veterans. Veterans who write do not simply choose their images on the basis of aesthetic appeal. Eric Leeds, discussing World War I veterans, argues that the metaphors of combat veterans are the result of

“the wedding of the symbolic world of language and the nonsymbolic world of physical experience, [thus] the realities of war become 'things to think with,' to fantasize with, to apply in action within political and social contexts.”[7]

The clash between the expectations generated by film, and the physical realities encountered by the soldier in Vietnam is the source of the veterans' film metaphors.

It took very little time for the soldier to conclude that his experience in Vietnam was not going to match up to his film-generated expectations. Men who go to war expect to kill people, and perhaps even to die gloriously; they do not expect to

bomb villages, to watch the suffering of women and children, and to be hated by the people that they believed they had come to help. In the words of Jan Scruggs, the man who became the driving force behind the construction of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C.:

"You had gone over there filled with images of John F. Kennedy, Hollywood movies, and Sergeant Rock comic books, and you did your duty, even though few of these images matched the muck and the moral confusion in Asia."

The betrayal of the soldier by film had a variety of consequences. There was, of course, the possibility of literal death; the category of kids "wiped out by 17 years of war movies." But even those soldiers who escaped injury were plunged into a state of ideological chaos, moral confusion, and alienation from the culture which had raised them, misinformed them, and shipped them off to war. An anonymous veteran in Mark Baker's book, *Nam*, explains:

"The firefights I had in the field, I can rationalize that for myself. You say, they knew the risk as well as you did. It was a fair fight. If I hadn't seen so many cowboy and Indian movies, I might not be so guilty about it. But [they] told me that there's a right way and a wrong way to go out and kill somebody. I imbibed that shit from my childhood on." [9]

Soldiers' identification with movie characters was so strong that they frequently turned fiction into reality. A G.I. with the 18th Aviation Company in Nha Trang describes the situation at his base during December of 1963:

"The worst part of it all is the Army couldn't trust us with weapons. The people who had been stationed there before me had shoot-outs, acting like Wild West characters. They would get drunk, take their weapons and have fast-draw contests. So all of our weapons were locked up at night in connex, for which only the armorer had the key." [10]

Sergeant-Major Mike Kukler describes the gunfights in which 60 men died during the first four months of 1968:

"Men would buy specially made low-slung holsters and the soldiers would face each other like cowboys and Indians looking for a fast draw. About half of the deaths occurred in the 19, 20, and 21 year-old age groups. Thirty per cent of all deaths were caused when the drawer shot himself in the leg. One-fourth of these deaths were officer deaths." (Holmes, p. 192)

The alienation of the soldier in the Vietnam War has been well documented and described by psychologists such as Robert Lifton, Charles Figley and Arthur Egendorf [11] who discuss alienation and distancing in terms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Though alienation is a feeling common to soldiers in all wars because of the traumatic nature of the combat experience, [12] the image of film as metaphor for a soldier's alienation is, for obvious reasons, a recent development.

I would like to discuss the images of film in two novels by Vietnam veterans-Robert Anderson's *Service for the Dead* and Stephen Wright's *Meditations in Green*.

These works use as a central metaphor the film and the filmmaker.

Robert Anderson was a graduate of Yale University who enlisted in the Marines and became an infantry lieutenant, serving at Hué during the Tet offensive of 1968. *Service for the Dead*, published in 1987, is his second Vietnam novel. His focus on the conflict between film and reality is foreshadowed by the Joseph Rael quote on the preface page:

"From each one of us there emanate two spirals: one going down and one going up. The first one is reality; the second, illusion. So — which do you choose?"

The protagonist of Anderson's novel is a young Marine named Mike. Mike has been wounded in Vietnam and is returning to a hospital in the U.S. The story of his tour in Vietnam unfolds along with the story of his trip home and his reunion with his family; a series of flashbacks and reminiscences. At the center of Mike's story is the enigmatic figure of a Marine named "Longo." Longo is obsessed with the movies and welcomes Mike to Vietnam by including him in his fantasy that the Vietnam War exists only in the imagination of the soldiers who fight it. (There is an old grunt joke that goes something like: "I ain't ever going to the in Vietnam, man." "Why is that?" "Because it don't exist." The unreal character of the war was also mirrored in the soldiers' descriptions of Vietnam as "The Brown Disneyland" and "Six Flags Over Nothing," as well as their practice of calling the U.S. "the World"(a term which pointed out the surreal nature of Vietnam.) Longo asks Mike if he's talked to Captain Matthews yet, and explains why he calls Matthews Captain Blood:

"He give you that stuff about the hearts and minds?...Captain Blood — hearts — get it?...He was Captain Hook for a while, but Pogo said that would make this Never-Never Land and he'd rather get older than stay here. Then he was Captain Gallant and we were all Germans and Englishmen run away from the law, changed our names — You ever see *Beau Geste*?[13]

Longo, by no accident, is from Hollywood, California, a black ballet dancer with a lisp who was drafted out of college. He is charismatic and irresistible, bringing everyone into his game of renaming, even creating the fear in one of them that the war couldn't exist without Longo:

"I wish Longo'd go back to California. Then we wouldn't have to be here. He's made this whole thing up" (Anderson, p. 30).

They call their base camp "the Fort," the bush "Frontierland," the VC snipers who shoot at them "Zorro" and "the Cisco Kid." Longo has a grand plan, which he reveals to Mike:

"Instead of waiting for the war to end, we just go ahead and start making movies right now. Like, turn the whole thing — this war, this country, this whole *scene* — turn it all into one big movie!...[N]ot a documentary. A *movie*: a real movie...I know it would work. I mean, look at this place...this beach — it's better than Southern California; and the country is full of beaches like this. And that's the basic idea: turn the

whole place into another California: Hollywood. Disneyland, the whole works...It's, like, *everybody* wants to be in the movies — you know, be part of the scene, one way or another...Think of it, turn this war into one big Hollywood set. With everything: commissaries, cameramen, directors, p.a.'s, stuntmen, wardrobe people, makeup, fan clubs — all that stuff. Man' you don't even have to tell the other side what you're doing: they'll know, once you start shooting. And then everybody'll want to get in on it. And wages, too — *union* wages. Man, you start paying the VC union wages to be in this big Hollywood spectacular and just see how fast they'd join up. Shit, all this money we're spending over here — helicopters, jets, napalm — you could make a really good movie — all kinds of special effects... [How would it end?] Who needs to end it? You just keep making more movies. Like, we make ones with us winning, to show back in the States — and they make ones with them winning, to show in Russia and China. That's all right, man, that's cool: it's only movies. And they don't all have to be war movies, either — that's just to take care of the people who've got to have a war. You could make romantic movies, musical comedies, anything." (Anderson, pp. 60-61)

Mike and Longo continue to recruit new squad members into their movie. The most important of these new members is The Professor (certainly named to remind us of that other Professor once stranded on *Gilligan's Island*).

"While the other marines discussed girl friends, cars, or boot camp days, Mike and Longo and the Professor would plan the movies they were going to make" (Anderson, p. 148).

Longo and the Professor seem to complement each other in a way that Mike does not. Longo marveled "at the Professor's calm and detached way of speaking" and the Professor, in turn, "told Mike he thought Longo was 'amazing — really amazing.'" Mike, in fact, becomes increasingly alienated by the combination of Longo and the Professor as time goes on and more and more of the people he knows are wounded or killed. The day before Longo is killed in battle, Mike gets drunk and has an argument with Longo where he rejects Longo's assertion that "it's all a movie...You can't take it serious" (Anderson, p. 148). "I'm serious," Mike answers. "Don't tell me what to be." The next morning Mike is embarrassed at his reaction to the still friendly and good-natured Longo.

Later that night the squad is shipped out by helicopter to rescue another unit which has been pinned down by the VC, and the battle scene, described from Mike's perspective, seems confusing and incomprehensible. Longo, however, appears to know exactly what is going on, mouthing lines right out of the movies:

"It's bad man — we walked into it. Everybody's pinned down. They got a machine gun set up in that tree line and they're trying to come around in back of us. Using the mortars to split us up. It looks like we've got to move up" (Anderson, p. 235).

Longo and his men are ordered to advance on the machine gun in a scene reminiscent of a dozen World War II films: the impossible task delegated to the hero and his men. At this moment film converges with reality. The plot dictates that he must now go out and die. Longo begins to say what the film moment would

require:

"You cover and then follow us." But as he realizes the irrevocable nature of the moment he pauses and swears, saying: "I can't...Shouldn't have... So stupid!...Why?" (Anderson, p. 247).

Mike never sees what actually happens to Longo because he is himself wounded by a machine gun bullet in his jaw and medevacked to the rear and then to Japan. He hears about Longo's death later, in a long letter from the Professor which describes a war where the movies are dead:

"The morality and values, etc., that we are brought up with have nothing to do with what goes on in a war. Except, perhaps, for the *unofficial* morality: e.g., John Wayne war movies. But, unfortunately, they have nothing to do with war either — really; which is why Longo's idea was so good: we *do* understand war movies — everybody does — much better than we understand war itself...Eventually...the talk came around to Longo, and it turned into a kind of unofficial 'service for the dead' for him, with those of us who knew him telling our favorite Longo stories. Then somebody...said, 'What do you think Longo is up to now?' Making a movie — what else? — someone else said, and then it really was like the old days, as we tried to figure out what the movie would be like. Maybe he's got together with Cecil B. De Mille — can you see it, the two of them up there, working on some big epic? Then someone else remembered that Walt Disney is dead now too — can you see that? — Longo and Disney together? (Anderson, pp. 266,269)

In the final scene of the book, Mike is lying in a motel room watching a television program on the Marines in World War II. The narrator describes them in glowing terms as "simple, ordinary men who somehow became extraordinary in battle... risking their lives so their buddies might live." (Anderson, p.774). Mike begins to weep as he repeats over and over "I want to go back!...Please, let me go."

"In a while he looked up at the screen again, at the marines fighting and dying. Were there children who were watching now too, he wondered, wanting to go to war themselves someday, to become someone else? Through his sobs he spoke again. 'I'm sorry,' he said, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry...I'm so sorry.'"

Anderson uses the movie metaphor to convey the deep ambivalence of the soldier toward the cultural images which have seduced, and then betrayed him. Though these images have failed him as instructors and teachers, he never loses his longing for the simple and clean answers they provide to confusing moral questions.

Stephen Wright's novel, *Meditations in Green* (which won the Maxwell Perkins Prize in 1983) also uses the film and the filmmaker as a central metaphor. Wright was drafted into the Army in 1969, and attended the U.S. Army intelligence school. He served in Vietnam through 1970.

Wright, like Anderson, chooses not to make his filmmaker character the protagonist of his story. Once again, a major theme in the book is the relationship of the protagonist to the filmmaker.

Spec. 4 James Griffin spends his tour in Vietnam staring through a large

magnifying glass, studying frame after frame of black and white aerial film footage for the intelligence division of the U.S. Army. The military name for his task is "image interpreter," and that is exactly what Griffin becomes — a seeker after truth in the myriad images of the war. The images, at first, seem very clear: reading the film is a relatively straightforward job. This initial sense of understanding images of the war is mirrored in Griffin's understanding of larger narrative plots. For example, when the "fucking new guy" Claypool is introduced to Griffin, Griffin imagines a whole series of episodes based on his war images:

"Griffin experienced a dreary film buff's satisfaction. The single character lacking from their B-war had finally arrived: The Kid. His past, his future were as clear, defined, and predictable as the freckles on his smooth face...He becomes an abused mascot of the company, is kidded relentlessly until the brusque hero...brimming with manly tenderness, takes pity and shelters him from an apparently good-natured but actually quite cruel reality. Friendship cemented, acceptance complete, the next morning The Kid trips a land mine and blows his guts out...The hero, a tear streaking his muddy cheek, ships The Kid's meager possessions...home to a Nebraska farm...Inflamed by vengeful hate, the hero then goes berserk, slaughtering a division of godless gooks and half the allied general staff before being subdued by a foxhole presentation of the Congressional Medal of Honor..."[14]

Many of the soldiers in the novel become obsessed with images, like the combat infantry squad where every man goes into the bush with a camera and an M-16 and the question, "Can you shoot?" becomes more complex than the new man can answer. But the filmmaker in *Meditations in Green* is unmistakably Weird Wendell. Wendell's official role on the base has long since been forgotten because both he and the soldiers around him are caught up in his plan to film the war:

"In any other war Wendell Payne would have been instantly recognizable as the goldbrick with the thick money belt...the one with the cap on backward catcher-style and the pile of chips and bills spreading beneath the hand holding the flush and the suspiciously uncanny luck. In this war he was making a movie." (Wright, p. 149)

Wendell's story is interspersed with Griffin's, and we read, at intervals throughout the novel, about him directing soldier/actors or showing them the various scenes that they have acted in. The film "diverted Payne's energies so thoroughly he could rarely be found on the set of the real war":

"The Movie...would embrace the complete complexity of the American experience in Southeast Asia. Wendell photographed indiscriminately, confident that form, like invisible writing exposed to a flame would reveal itself beneath the heat of his talent."

Griffin's initially coherent view of the war grows increasingly more fragmented, as his grasp on the meanings of the images he works with and lives with become less and less understandable. Explanations, Griffin comes to understand, have little use when they can be blown apart any time by experience:

"Catastrophe lacked coherence. Every separate day was built anew and

then dismantled at night, the successive constructions becoming less and less elaborate, lonely props thrown up against hope by a weariness so deep his bones felt tire with sand in their eyes." (Wright, p. 256)

At the same time, Wendell works harder and harder to fit those very images into his film. Towards the end of the novel Griffin watches a four and a half hour screening of Wendell's film:

"Well?" asked the director.

"Wendell, uh, this movie..."

"Yes?"

"I don't believe it."

"Yeah,"

"It's a mess."

"Huh?"

"I don't know, maybe it's me, but I couldn't make any sense of it at all. I mean, there's no beginning, no middle, no end. There's no coherence. It just kind of settles over you. Like a musty tent."

"You know nothing about cinema." (Wright, p. 251)

In the were before the final battle Griffin and the other men in his unit are gathered in the chapel watching a screening of NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD. He likes it. As "armed gangs of potbellied men roam the daylight countryside hunting for the ghouls," the attack siren sounds. The base is being overrun by an NVA regiment. During the battle Griffin comes across the badly wounded Wendell who demands that Griffin find his camera and finish the picture for him. But it is too late. Wendell dies, and Griffin, though he tries, can feel nothing at all. No longer able to make sense out of anything, he finds himself seated on the roof of the officers club watching the world around him burn, contemplating the inevitability of the moment:

"He saw how the gestures of each instant since his induction and probably from further back than he wished to know had conspired to lead him gently as a domesticated animal to the violence of this moment, binding him to this roof, atop this horror...He began to swoon into the sensation that must occur when one is at last in possession of meaning...Over to the left there was still a radiance visible inside the chapel and he wondered how the movie had come out, unaware the spectatorless film had concluded long ago, the ghouls shot in their heads, the bodies dragged to crematory fires on glistening meathooks, and now the reel spun round and round, the last foot of celluloid slapping repeatedly against the projector. The screen was blank, a rectangle of burning light." (Wright, pp. 316-318)

Griffin's inability to integrate the nightmare images of the war into a coherent whole is highlighted by stark contrast with the neat and simple ending of NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD. The horrors that exist on film are contained and controlled by a narrative structure, which provides a framework of explanation for the events depicted. The war, plotless and anarchic, supports no such framework.

The choice of film and filmmaker as metaphor springs directly from veteran's ambivalence about the culture which sent him to war. These Vietnam War

narratives deconstruct the seamless surface of war films and question the cultural myths upon which they are founded. Though the filmmaker appears as a character in these novels, they do not speak to him. Rather, they are directed at the filmgoing audience, to a new generation of soldiers-to-be who are being seduced by a new generation of war films.

Films have become an acknowledged weapon in the war over the rights to the "real" story of the Vietnam War. That the battle is over "image" rather than reality is most apparent in the heated arguments generated by the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Washington. The black marble wall, engraved with the names of the soldiers killed in Vietnam during the war, is a strong statement: here are the dead, judge for yourselves. A small number of politically powerful veterans and interested parties violently objected to the construction of the memorial and managed to hold it up until the Memorial Fund agreed to place Frederick Hart's sculpture, a statue of three infantrymen, opposite the monument. Says Jan Scruggs,

"This small group wanted to use the Memorial to say to the war's opponents, 'You were wrong. You have blood on your hands.' They wanted to take an undeclared war that had oozed on and off the center stage of American life and transform it into a John Wayne movie. They wanted the memorial to make Vietnam what it had never been in reality: a good, clean, glorious war seen as necessary and supported by a united country." (Scruggs, p. 94)

What does this have to do with the movies? Let me give you some things to think about. You are familiar with the photo of the flag-raising on Iwo Jima, The Joel Rosenthal image, later sculpted and cast in bronze as a memorial, was used as the official poster of a war bond drive that raised \$220 million, and was also pictured on a commemorative stamp that had the largest sales in history. This photo was actually of the *second* flag-raising on the island, and it was staged for the camera. [15] Without a doubt, the most frequently mentioned film in Vietnam novels by combat veterans is John Wayne's SANDS OF IWO JIMA: the film ends with the image of the fictitious flag-raising. Frederick Hart, the man who created the sculpture which was placed in front of the wall, had apprenticed under Felix de Welden. Welden was the sculptor of the Iwo Jima Memorial (Scruggs, p. 49).

There is a strange circularity to all of this; a lineup of coincidence which would make a conspiracy theorist drool. But instead of discussing abstract conclusions, I'd like to close with a war story told by Donald Hines, an Army infantryman in Vietnam in 1967:

"I don't know why, but I was lying there, and I turned to one of the guys next to me and said, 'When I count to three, open up. Give me cover fire. Just spray the area.' He said, 'What are you going to do? I said, 'When I count to three one, two, three,' and I jumped up and threw a grenade where [the enemy soldier] was. I got [him]. The guy next to me had been over there for about four months, five months, and I was over there for what? Three weeks? He said, 'Hey. We don't pull that John Wayne shit over here. You could have easily gotten wasted by one of the snipers.' It never dawned on me. You know: 'That's the way John Wayne did it. Why not me?'"[16]

NOTES

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2. Michael Herr, "Sending the War Home," *Esquire* (June, 1983), p. 265.
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4. Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (Autumn 1980), pp. 8-9,
5. James Roy MacBean, "VENT D'EST or Godard and Rocha at the Crossroads," *Movies and Methods: An Anthology*, Bill Nichols, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).
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8. Jan Scruggs and Joel Swerdlow, *To Heal a Nation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), p. 10.
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10. Al Santoli, *Everything We Had: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Thirty-Three American Soldiers Who Fought It* (New York: Ballantine, 1981), p. 6.
11. Robert Lifton, *Home from the War: Vietnam Veterans, Neither Victims Nor Executioners* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Charles Figley, *Strangers at Home: Vietnam Veterans Since the War* (New York: Praeger, 1980); Arthur Egendorf, *Healing from the War: Trauma and Transformation after Vietnam* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1985).
12. See Eric J. Leeds, *No Man's Land* (on World War I). J. Glen Gray, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970) — on World War II; Gerald Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: Free Press, 1987).
13. Robert Anderson, *Service for the Dead* (New York: Arbor House, 1986), p. 25.
14. Stephen Wright, *Meditations in Green* (New York: Bantam, 1983), pp. 23-24.
15. Bill Ross, *Iwo Jima: Legacy of Valor* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1985), p. xiii.
16. Heather Brandon, *Casualties: Death in Vietnam, Anguish and Survival in America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), p. 113.

House of Games One born every minute

by Laura Kipnis

from *Jump Cut*, no. 36, May 1991, pp. 25-31

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Dr. Margaret "Ford," psychiatrist, has written a pop-psychology bestseller entitled *"Driven": Compulsion and Obsession in Everyday Life*. An automotive age Freud might have observed that this overabundance of vehicular symbols (Ford, driven) must signify a condition of being stuck, stalled, fixated — thus compelled and doomed to repetition. This is the small joke that propels David Mamet's *HOUSE OF GAMES*. A psychiatrist (Lindsay Crouse) has so little insight into her own desire that she is lured, through the bait provided by one of her patients, to act out her own repetition compulsion in an elaborate con game orchestrated by an ensemble of charismatic con men whose perfect understanding of human motivation, behavior, and the female unconscious allows them to play her like a jukebox.

Margaret Ford is not your typical female heroine. Dr. Ford is a "career woman," whom Mamet the director has denuded of all the conventional cinematic attributes of femininity: her barbershop coif, stubby nails, boring businesslike suits and no-nonsense gait make her a different species entirely from any other cinematic heroine of recent memory. She lacks the personal conventions of womanliness, and her stylized, theatrical performance seems directed to read as "unnatural," "mannish." She's stiff, chilly, humorless; she is an expert on compulsion who is herself driven. A workaholic, a compulsive chain smoker, she obsessively scribbles data about her patients in notebooks, and until her pre-seduction scene with con man Mike (when suddenly we notice her eyes sparkling, courtesy of what seems to be the first use of an eyelight) she appears sexless.

All the conventional techniques of representing the female as object of desire are resisted. Mamet has updated the visual codes of the repressed female so that they seem synonymous with the image of the career woman—we read Margaret Ford's repression in the professional demeanor that represses and deforms her femininity. And the diagnosis of "repression" is confirmed by her propensity toward Freudian slips — the repressed material is symptomatically screaming to be let out. If womanliness is, as Joan Riviere wrote — and just about all cinema graphically reasserts daily — a form of masquerade, then Margaret Ford, at the opening of the film, is strangely out of costume, closer to the anachronistic type Riviere, writing in 1929, described as the "overtly masculine type of woman" often

found in intellectual pursuits.[1] [[open notes in new window](#)] However, by the close of the film, Ford will be recouped into the visual norms of womanliness, and will have taken up, vividly, the masquerade of femininity.

The plot of *HOUSE OF GAMES* is structured around a series of exchanges that Dr. Ford enters into with men, exchanges in that their form could be described as, "You give me something and I will give you something." The plot is put in motion when during a psychiatric session, a young patient of Dr. Ford's named Billy Hahn, a compulsive gambler, pulls a gun and threatens to shoot himself. Dr. Ford, spurred by Billy's charge, "You don't do dick, man, it's all a con game, you do nothing," offers him a bargain that seems to defy all professional norms — by *guaranteeing* her ability to have an effect (as psychotherapy consumers in the audience laugh bitterly into their popcorn). "Give me the gun and I will help you," she tells him.

Billy hands over the gun and issues a challenge. He owes an unpayable \$25,000 debt to a gambler named Mike and so what is she going to do about that? This occasions the scene of Ford's second exchange with a second man, Mike (Joe Mantegna), "the Unbeatable Gambler, seen as Omniscient," according to Ford's notes.

Ford marches straight into the House of Games, a pool hall bar with a back room poker game — a classically male space — as if she believes she has a right to be there, and confronts Mike on behalf of her patient. "You think you're a tough guy, I think you're just a bully," she informs him. Apparently impressed with her mastery of the situation, he compliments her on her skills of perception. "How come you figured me so quick?" "Well in my work..." she begins. "What is your work?" he wants to know. "None of your business," she tells him.

In the second exchange, at the House of Games, Mike issues the bargain: If she pretends to be his girlfriend and spies on another player in a high stakes poker game, he'll waive Billy's debt. What she's looking for is a "tell" that this player is bluffing, a tell being a behavior that gives something away. Mike demonstrates how he can detect a tell in her: she unconsciously gestures with her nose toward the hand in which she conceals a chip, allowing him to read her secret correctly every time.

In inviting Ford to "spy," enticing her into the role of voyeur, Mike sets up what will be, in this film, a problematic connection — what is in fact, a crucial gap — between seeing and knowing on the part of the female character, in which the film's moments of female voyeurism lead invariably to its scenes of female chastisement and humiliation. Ford, now in the role of Mike's girlfriend, and caught up in what she *thinks* she sees, becomes so completely enthralled by the scenario she witnesses that she offers to slake Mike's hand with a check for 8,000 dollars — until a gun that suddenly starts to leak water alerts her to the fact that she has, in fact, been set up as a mark by a group of con men, and that the entire poker game was merely a *scene*, staged as a device to con her out of her money. Having caught these "bad men" in the act, now secure in the knowledge that her savvy protects her from theft roses, charmed by them, and reluctantly attracted to Mike, she returns to the House of Games and offers a third exchange, this time to Mike. She has a "proposition" to make him, she says — she wants to make a study of the confidence game for a future book and she wants him to cooperate. Mike readily agrees. But what's in it for him? Ford doesn't offer a *quid pro quo*, except for the double

entendre of the "proposition," and she doesn't put it together when Mike later instructs her, "Everybody gets something out of every transaction."

What Ford doesn't know, and the audience won't know until much later, is that this band of con men are so skilled in textual hermeneutics that they have somehow, discerned from a close reading of her book, *Driven: Obsession and Compulsion in Everyday Life*, that there is a pathological aspect to her own nature that will lead her to *desire* to be their victim. Margaret Ford, it seems, rather than simply writing about compulsive behavior, is so afflicted by some little understood compulsion of her *own* that she will abandon herself to the world of the con men, almost begging to be taken (in all senses of the word). The brilliance of these con men (even aside from the fact that they are ingeniously able to predict her every response and action in advance) is to allow her the complacent illusion that she can have mastery in their world: they allow her to *see* them trying to con her, and once she's secure in the false knowledge that *she's* outsmarted *them*, and that she's accepted as one of them, they take her for everything in an elaborate con, an 80,000 dollar con that takes in not only Dr. Ford, but the audience as well.

The plot, as I said, is structured as a series of exchanges that Margaret Ford enters into with men. What she is bargaining, in each case, is her professional competence — her insight — which will ultimately be shown up as a counterfeit currency. The precariousness of female authority, and of female vision, is made pivotal here: in each of these exchanges the man withholds a crucial piece of information, thus blindsiding Dr. Ford's ability to be what she thinks she is — in control. The gap in her knowledge is where she really fits into the structure — as a *victim*, a *mark*, with the control residing elsewhere. This plot point then constitutes the female character as, *a priori*, split: she lacks self-identity, she is not what she thinks she is. As in the case of female ontology generally, she has been inscribed into a structure given in advance, without her knowledge or consent — in a very real sense, she doesn't know her place. This essential category error, amplified by her continuing misrecognition of her place, both advances the Plot and enmeshes her ever more deeply in the "plot." So in this case, at least, the film is clear that the Plot is a plot against the woman, in which each exchange leads her ever more inexorably toward catastrophe.

"I swear to you. Give me the gun and I will help you," she assures Billy Hahn. "I have a proposition for you," she tells Mike, bargaining with her sexuality, which however, like her professional competence, the film has labored to produce as a problem, an inadequacy. Her exaggerated self-confidence — a function of her lack of self-knowledge, will lead eventually to her undoing and her exposure: she doesn't know who she *really* is (because she doesn't know her place), and the film's task will be to expose her imposture.

HOUSE OF GAMES, a film whose improbable leads are a con man and a psychiatrist, is a film whose constellation of concerns is, more familiarly, the nexus of power, knowledge and gender. Quite clearly here in Mametland, knowledge is power and to lack knowledge is to fall prey to victimization. This is a film crucially about epistemology — about how knowledge is produced and whose knowledge counts.

But the more furtive aspect of the film is that here the act of knowing is completely imbricated in gender — the film systematically works to produce an

epistemological field in which women's relation to knowledge, and by extension, vision, is impossible, while male knowledge is mystified in such a way that it borders on omniscience and eroticized to such an extent that "knowing" is returned to its Biblical antecedents, synonymous with sexual access. The deficiency in relation to seeing and the visible on the part of the female is, by extension, a problem of the spectator, whom HOUSE OF GAMES maneuvers into the position of a transvestite who ultimately renounces the female position and reclaims masculinity as the "correct" way of seeing.[2]

Mike's "reading" of Margaret Ford in the pool hall, as he explains the theory of the "tell," and demonstrates how transparent she is to him, introduces as to the con man as master decoder and to the con as an epistemological system, an interpretive method, in fact, remarkably similar to psychoanalysis: it is a depth psychology that presumes that repression, either as willed secrecy or as a mechanism of the ego, is never complete. (As Mike tells her after he's propositioned her, "You're blushing. That's a tell. These things we want, we can do them or not do them, but we can't hide them.") It seems that the world of the con, as a science of interpretation, rivals if not outperforms psychiatry, which is represented as a debased and ineffective form of knowledge with Margaret Ford, psychiatrist, in a sort of mirror relation to her patients: something of an inadequately sealed vessel, prone to emitting embarrassing and telling Freudian slips, out of control, "driven." She can't "contain" herself — her interiority is leaking out all over the place — while the con men have a profession, rather than an interiority. Their motivations are never put into question, whereas Ford's interiority becomes the film's primary concern. And while their knowledge is completely adequate to Margaret Ford as an object, she has no technique for understanding them — they are immune from any kind of understanding to which she has access. She finally has to be jolted into awareness — by spying on a scene not meant for her to see, in fact — in a setup where the female character's insight is purchased at the expense of the most profound sexual humiliation.

At the manifest level, HOUSE OF GAMES gives us two competing worlds of professional knowledge — the science of psychiatry on the one hand and the skill of the con men on the other — and projects us into a filmic universe structured by this opposition between what would seem, upon first glance, to be two radically different epistemological enterprises. These are epistemologies that are clearly, in the first instance, class based: Ford represents the professional knowledge of bourgeois science, but even aside from her professional airs tends to swagger through the frame with the confidence of a secure upbringing in the upper crust — her home is genteel and costly, she's someone who has no problem walking out of a bank with 80,000 dollars on short notice and when she marches into the House of Games, an alien terrain, it's as if, as the idiom goes, she thinks she owns the place — and with her cultural and educational capital, in a sense, she does. The knowledge of the con men is clearly class-based as well, it's the knowledge of the lumpen criminal class, and Ford's attraction to Mike and his world certainly has its precedents in all the previous society-girl-falls-for-gangster genre films of the 40s, and more generally in the long and uneasy sexual attraction of the bourgeoisie to the inappropriate (because cross-class) sexual object: the maid, the governess, the gamekeeper, the criminal, etc.

If these two different epistemological enterprises are in the first instance class

based, they are also, crucially, in this film, gendered. The ideological work of the film is to take up a random *difference*, specifically, the difference between the con and psychiatry as forms of knowledge; to generate out of this difference, an *opposition*; and align this opposition with sexual difference — that is, to articulate this difference as a binary opposition which is both gendered and hierarchized.

Let me try to plot out in a linear fashion, the kind of complicated symbolic labor the film must perform in order to manufacture a gardened opposition out of con men/ psychiatry. First, the world of the con men must be produced as an epistemological system — as a sphere of knowledge, not simply a business or a criminal enterprise. One of the great pleasures of this film are its anthropological moments, in which we, the audience, along with Margaret Ford take instruction in the arcane mechanics of the con, (part of the seductive apparatus of the con men is giving Dr. Ford tantalizing small glimpses of their world) which is represented as a highly codified system of and knowledge passed down through generations: the various cons have names ("The Short Con," "The Mitt," "Die Tap"), the con men practice and refine their technique, there appears to be some kind of apprentice system, and the con men have a self. Consciousness and pride about their place within a professional guild. These glimpses permit the viewer a momentary insider status as well, as we are temporarily let in on the arcane world of the con and in on the knowledge that *they* possess and could use to con and victimize *us*, were we to be so unknowing and incautious as Margaret Ford.

Second, the con as a system of knowledge is placed into juxtaposition with psychiatry, reconstituting the con as a science of the *psyche* that rivals psychiatry in its predictive and diagnostic powers. Billy Hahn, the compulsive gambler patient, and Margaret Ford herself both refer to psychiatry as "a con," setting up the identity between the two, which is paid off in Mike's first meeting with Dr. Ford, where *he* interprets *her* "symptomatic" behavior. The theory of the "tell," as explained by Mike, is highly similar to the Freudian parapraxis — a slip of the tongue, the pen or some other unconscious but "telling" behavior. And the tell is foundational to con man epistemology in the same way that the parapraxis is to psychoanalysis, except that as practiced by the con men, the interpretation of the tell seems absolute and infallible, as compared to the inexact science of psychoanalysis.

Third, the film genders these two spheres of knowledge. Just as the space of the HOUSE OF GAMES, and this enclave of con men, is a completely masculine sphere, so psychiatry is represented as a world of women — a world not only of all women psychiatrists (the other significant character is an older woman psychiatrist, a sort of "mother confessor" to Ford) but of a certain metonymic slippage between female doctors and female patients. After a brief prologue, the film opens with a session between Dr. Ford and a female patient, a young woman who has apparently committed a murder and is in some sort of psychiatric prison. She issues a challenge, a demand, to Dr. Ford, in a scene opening in tight close up of this woman looking almost directly into the camera — a challenge to the viewer as well as the film's address to Ford: "Do you think you're immune from experience?" she demands to know. Throughout the film this woman continues to function as a one-woman Greek chorus of Ford's interiority, so that the inner lives of the two border on interchangeability. "He said, "I can make any woman a whore in fifteen minutes," the murderess relates after Ford meets Mike, "That poor girl,"

Ford remarks to Maria, her older female colleague, in one of her characteristic Freudian slips. "All her life my father tells her she's a whore..." The identity between the two of them will culminate, in a certain clanging symmetry, with Ford herself becoming a murderess.

Fourth, these two spheres of knowledge, gendered and opposed, are inserted into the patriarchal. They are aligned with sexual hierarchy, such that the female sphere will be constituted as deficient, even pathological, while the male sphere emerges as triumphant and heroic. This female knowledge of the "helping professions" that can't really help at all stands subordinate to the instrumentalized yet successful male bastion of con man knowledge, and this hierarchy appears so natural within the film that it seems almost already in place.

Thus the symbolic economy of the film institutes and naturalizes an opposition that is completely constructed and completely unstable in such a way that existing hierarchies of sexual difference are reinforced and expanded, given that this gendered condition of knowledge also permeates the spectator position produced by the film.

It's not only Margaret Ford who's being set up, it's the audience as well. As long as we know only what Ford knows, as long as the knowledge necessary to make was, of the plot is withheld from us, the audience inhabits what has been coded a female position — of not knowing. The dialectic the film sets up is between the advantageousness of knowledge and the perils of ignorance, with the audience oscillating, as a transvestite, between the two states as the status of *our* knowledge shifts. As long as we're in the feminine position, we too are at risk — we're conned *along* with Ford. There then comes a crucial shift, when the audience realizes, somewhat before Ford does, that she has been conned, and that the events she had thought were taking place spontaneously — including going to bed with Mike — were in fact scripted in advance by the con men. Once the audience clues into this, and once we're in position of superior knowledge to Ford, we have acceded from a feminine position of ignorance to a masculine position of knowledge, and this gender shift takes on powerful associations of pleasure and relief as we finally *understand*. The transvestism of the male spectator forced into a troublesome identification with the female position, and the female spectator forced into a masochistic identification with the female character both give way to the traditional mode of spectatorship in which "everyone wants to be elsewhere than in the feminine position." [3]

Once this initial ideological project is underway, HOUSE OF GAMES then moves into a new terrain, a revenge plot in which Margaret Ford seeks retaliation against her victimizers. But unlike the purifying revenge of say, cultural hero Charles Bronson, this revenge becomes associated in a complicated way to the *topos* of female pathology.

Margaret Ford, I have said, is represented here as the classic repressed female: with her rigid demeanor, her compulsiveness, her propensity for Freudian slips — she's a walking collection of symptoms. The logic of the symptom is its dialectic of the visible and the invisible, and this logic demands that when the female body is represented as symptomatic, it necessitates decoding. This creates a functional gap that must be filled by a specific character function, by a revealer-of-what-is-hidden.

This is the function filled by Mike, the film's "epistemological hero," who guarantees the final emergence of Truth within the narrative. This term is borrowed from Mary Ann Doane, who uses it to describe the character function of the (male) doctor/ psychiatrist in a particular subgenre of 40s melodrama that focuses obsessively on the mental or physical illness of a female character.[4] As Doane points out, femininity within a patriarchal culture is constituted as, *a priori*, a pathological condition, and in this genre the illness of the woman is never simply local or incidental, but somehow implicates her entire being — it is the essence of her character. This hidden illness associated with the woman then necessitates the figure of the doctor/ technician, the man of science summoned to decode the logic of the symptom — and to reveal the hidden pathology — of the female.

The doctor function that Doane describes has been enlarged in *HOUSE OF GAMES* to encompass the diagnostic skills of the con man. Ford's romance with Mike, initiated by his reading of her in the pool hall, is consummated by his excavating the truth of her buried sexual desire: his knowledge is the road to her assent. The film has thus far labored with great dedication to grant epistemological superiority to both the con man world and Mike as its leading "brain" — he is the privileged figure of knowledge in a privileged field of knowledge. The payoff comes when Mike proceeds, in the film's climactic moment, to pronounce the *truth* of Ford's *pathology* (the truth of the woman's *essence*). Given his epistemological status, there is no room for doubt — we are compelled to belief.

After having discovered the con men supposedly attempting to con her the first time, Ford returns to the House of Games to search out Mike. She has a "proposition" to make him, she wants to study him to write about the world of the con men. By identifying the exchange as a "proposition" Foul, it is implied, is knowingly bargaining with her sexuality. But her sexuality, like her professional competence, has already been completely problematized, and now will be further exposed, in a scene of profound sexual humiliation, as inadequate. Whenever Margaret Ford tries to make an exchange, she can't carry it through. She just doesn't have the goods.

Ford takes revenge — by shooting Mike — in a piece of action that links *HOUSE OF GAMES* to a stew of recent female revenge plots (*FATAL ATTRACTION*, *SOMEONE TO WATCH OVER ME*, *JAGGED EDGE*) in which a woman metes out justice at the end of a gun. (There is a certain obviousness to this formula that really insists on female disempowerment or lack — it takes a woman *plus* a gun to counter male power.) Ford is spurred to reprisal when, after the big con, the \$80,000 con, has succeeded, she overhears a conversation among the con men that finally reveals to her the true "plot" in terms that graphically name her inadequacy and violently jar her to consciousness about the disjunction between her own sense of self and the cold brutality of the con men's judgment. She is, in their shared view, both pathetically deformed and sexually ridiculous, "Mike, how'd you know she was going to go for it?" one of them asks. "Go for it, the broad's an addict." "The bitch is a booster...the bitch is a born thief." "Took her money and screwed her too," one of them compliments Mike. "A small price to pay," he gloats.

According to the con men's logic, Ford was not simply conned by them, but actively sought the chance to fulfill her pathology — that was her side of the exchange. And in the film's climactic were, Mike spits out confirmation of this supposed pathology

at her, after she's reversed the balance of power and plugged him with a bullet:

MIKE: "Hey fuck you. This is what you always wanted — you crooked bitch...you thief...you always need to get caught — cause you know you're bad...you sought this out...this is what you always wanted. I knew it the first time you came in. You're worthless, you know it. You're a whore. I knew it the first time you came in. You came back like a dog to its own vomit. You sought it out."

For the compulsive, according to Ford's own notebook, there is "the necessity of finding a place to be humiliated." "And what is it you think I want?" she asks Mike during the seduction scene. "What am I?" she demands of him. "You learned some things about yourself you'd rather not know," he tells her in the final confrontation. *His knowledge*, the film implies, is the scene of her humiliation. She is humiliated because he has discovered the truth, her secret — that she is bad, worthless, a thief.

The moment of the shooting however opens up an indeterminacy about this diagnosis, and a certain level of gender instability — which the film then quickly recoups and closes down, but one that is worth exploring.

Given the psychoanalytic metamotif that the film erects, with its themes of repression, repetition, and the primacy of the unconscious, perhaps the best way to describe this indeterminacy is through the analogy the film sets up with the psychoanalytic scene. "You came back like a dog to its own vomit" is a stark and ugly way of describing a repetition compulsion, and the film's premise is that what it implies is Ford's "necessity to be humiliated" is just such a compulsion to repeat.

Given that Ford's relation to Mike is so completely transferential — he is, for her, the subject-supposed-to-know, presumed to know the truth of her desire — then Ford's acting-out is something like the repetition of the psychoanalytic transference. And her relationship to Mike, who has the task of voicing her unconscious, almost minors the psychoanalytic scene. It is potentially through Mike, then, the film's master "analyst," that the transference could be worked *through* and the cycle of repetition broken, in that the transference of the psychoanalytic scene is, supposedly, a repetition with a difference. (After all, what distinguishes the psychoanalytic transference from other forms of transference is the exchange of money, and Ford *does* pay.)

But psychoanalysis is a relation between *two* unconsciouss, while the film has worked throughout to deny any interiority to the con men. They don't have an unconscious between them, they don't have desire; like some cartoon dad, they just have business. All desire, all affect, all interiority exists on the side of the women. The film's denial of any counter-transference, the denial that Mike is engaged or implicated in the scene, the fact that his desire masquerades as objectivity — puts his diagnosis into question. When he says she's bad, a thief, a whore, is it even *she* that he's talking about? Maybe it's his mother. Maybe his relation to her is as phantasmatic as hers is to him. The only difference between them is that the film grants *him* the power, and the weight of its own representational apparatus, to enforce his phantasmatic reading.

And aren't these films of female pathology merely narrativations of normative medical and psychotherapeutic practices that rely on such diagnoses of women

emitted from an omniscient, "disinterested" perch legitimated by institutional enforcements like the A.M.A. or the A.P.A.? When Ford is finally shocked into the recognition that Mike is, like all of our worst fantasies of our analysts — solely in it for the money, without ethics — she terminates the analysis. When she shoots Mike, she is, like Freud's Dora, walking out on a bad analysis, as well as subverting the institutions that work through those particular forms of power and authority.

Thus the shooting sets up a certain tension between levels of the film. Momentarily, the woman character refuses the diagnosis of pathology and breaks out of the fix of the male's institutionally sanctioned power. However, the following and final scene of *HOUSE OF GAMES* then seals the film's meaning, firmly conferring truth-status on Mike's interpretation of Ford. She is everything he claimed — a thief and a crooked bitch, who comes to *know* and accept that she is bad. The film's mise-en-scene and closure collaborate to confirm the diagnosis, immemorialize the dead (epistemological) hero, and reassert established sexual hierarchy.

After the shooting, Ford reappears in an extended epilogue, having returned from a long vacation. She is a transformed woman. Her hair has highlights, she is wearing something splashy and floral, she has on dangly earrings.

She has suddenly acquired femininity — she is nothing if not in masquerade — which is, of course, according to Riviere, *synonymous* with womanliness (and interestingly given this context, analyzed by her as a strategy adopted by women who desire masculine power to avert both their own anxiety and the male retribution they fear). Ford, the new friendly, feminized Ford, asked to sign a copy of her book for a fan, inscribes it, "Forgive yourself." And then proceeds, with a small smile of self-acceptance, to boost a fancy lighter from another woman's purse. So she has simultaneously acceded to her femininity — in the most pronounced fashion — *and* to her nature as a thief. She's acceded to everything she had been repressing until it was all unleashed by her encounter with Mike.

But for the film, her pathetic parade of self-acceptance is only a thin veil over the true essence of her deformity. In Mamet's linguistic universe, language doesn't exist outside of gender. The trivial and illegitimate "feminine" language of pop psychology through which Ford has come to this self-acceptance — "Forgive yourself" — simply doesn't compare with the brutal magnificence of Mike's language — "like a dog to its vomit" — and has no truth status whatsoever in this film.

This is the film's last small joke on Ford — her knowledge and especially her self-knowledge have already been exposed as inferior, inadequate. She never did have any insight, she can't really *see* what's going on. She is bad, is a "crooked bitch," insofar as the film has worked so effectively to valorize the status of Mike's knowledge for the spectator. The dead hero reclaims epistemological supremacy, and the woman's pathological essence is made manifest.

The question that finally remains is that of the spectator's transference. The relation of the audience to Mike's knowledge is necessarily, as it was for Margaret Ford, one of complete enthrallment — he is also the *film's* subject-supposed-to-know, and as soon as there is a subject-supposed-to-know, there is transference. This is a transference facilitated by Silence — the silences of the film around the

constitution and origin of Mike's knowledge. Such perfect knowledge as his is clearly a *fantasy* of knowledge; the con man is a phantasmatic figure of knowledge who would not himself withstand the microscrutiny devoted to the female. The romantic mystique that the film works to attach to the male figure can only be maintained by keeping the audience in a suspended transference relation to this knowledge, a transference that must never be analyzed or worked through. The operation of the film then is to invest the audience's pleasure in a phantasmatic perfect knowledge that is a male province, and in a fantasy of knowledge that is *prior* to and *exceeds* the film frame. The residue of this film is our pleasure in, our desire for a knowledge that is, by definition, exclusively male. To the extent that the film works to produce and confirm this fantasy of perfect knowledge, it enforces the clutches of an unending transference, the legitimacy of paternal authority, and the grip of masculine power.

NOTES

1. Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," in *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. Cora Kaplan (New York: Methuen, 1986), pp.35-44.
2. See Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator," *Screen* (September/October 1982), pp. 5-87.
3. Doane, *ibid.* p. 1.
4. Mary Ann Doane "Clinical Eyes: The Medical Discourse" in *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp.38-69.

Heathers Scent of dominance

by Nick Burns

from *Jump Cut*, no. 36, May 1991, pp. 32-36

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Michael Lehman's 1988 release, *HEATHERS*, a teen film about suicide, was not a box office smash. Critically, however, it had mixed reviews. Bob Mondello, who reports regularly for American University's WAMU and National Public Radio's "All Things Considered," included the film on his ten best of the year list. More important, *HEATHERS* has achieved a certain cult status with segments of U.S. youth. My sister, for instance, reporting from a white Detroit suburb, says her teenage son and his friends have watched the film over and over. My friend's son, visiting from Iowa, was anxious to see the film again after I mentioned I was working on this paper. And an informal poll among my students at the University of Oregon indicates a wide knowledge of *HEATHERS*. Any mention of the film in class generates responses from smiles and head-nods to "cool film."

HEATHERS stars Winona Ryder and Christian Slater. They both attend suburban Westerburg High, somewhere in Ohio. Ostensibly, the film is about peer pressure in an upper-middle-class high school; everyone wears nice clothes, yet someone must dominate the school pecking order. At the start, three girls, all named Heather, lead the pack. When Veronica/Winona Ryder wants to be included in their group, the three Heathers let her follow them around to learn the wiles of being popular. Then, a rash of suicides hits the school (eventually there's even a copy-cat suicide attempt). One of the Heathers is the first to die. J.D., Christian Slater, the new boy at school, masterminds the deaths, and he regularly induces Veronica's help.

But *HEATHERS* is not a teen slasher movie. It has no buckets of blood or other graphic violence; these kids die young and leave beautiful corpses. The film is dark and witty, caustic and sarcastic, a black comedy. These teenagers' alienation leads to drastic results. The initial "suicides" are murders, but *HEATHERS* is not a murder mystery. The film contains a little bit of all teen genres.[1][[open notes in new window](#)]

What, then, is an appropriate methodology to evaluate *HEATHERS*? The film falls soundly under the postmodernist blanket, full of what Fredric Jameson defines as "pastiche" and "blank parody." [2] Its cynicism can also be read in a feminist way. However, I think neither of these approaches adequately accounts for the film's

style. In this paper I want to show how HEATHERS defuses white suburban teen angst by offering filmic style and twists of conventional film language, instead of possibilities for change (however trite or clichéd). I want to argue that HEATHERS posits suburban teen subculture as aesthetic distinction, a lifestyle offering an aesthetic distance based on privileging form over content.

First, though, a very brief overview of how one might respond to the film from a postmodernist and/or feminist perspective, which I think are important though incomplete approaches. The film is full of empty references to popular culture. For example, when a radio DJ flames Trenton helps teens on a phone-in show called "Hot Probs," one listener complains, "I mean like Skipper's okay, but sometimes I feel like I'm on that island." The DJ answers as he hangs up, "If it wasn't for the courage of the fearless crew, the Minnow would be lost — and you are, too." At another moment, two policemen discover a double "suicide"; their names are "McCord" and "Milner," a reference to the old television police show ADAM 12. In this scene, one cop prances and moves with all the stage mannerisms typically attributed to Barney Fife/Don Knotts on THE ANDY GRIFFITH SHOW.

These audio and visual cues match a series of satiric clichés in the film: mineral water signifies homosexuality; students are categorized as "Swatch Dogs" and "Diet Coke Heads"; Marvin Gaye lyrics become used as a drunken come-on ("When I get that feeling, I need sexual healing"); *Cliff Notes* for Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* seem to offer J.D. his initial inspiration to turn Heather's murder into a suicide. Yet each tidbit is just a simple allusion to other shows, books, movies, songs, etc. Even thematically, this structured emptiness quickly becomes apparent. The very first scene of the film in the school lunch room offers, among other issues, racial stereotyping, anorexia, drug abuse, sports, peer pressure, and world hunger; each subject is picked up and put down in a few quick seconds of film time, never to be mentioned again. Thus, the film seems simply empty at heart: funny, yes, but vacuous.

Meanwhile, the opening song, "Que Será, Será," as arranged by Van Dyke Parks and performed in a lush, camp, vaguely Doris Day rendition by Syd Straw (and reprised during the final credits as a more soulful ballad by Sly Stone), does hold potential thematic value — as does the other song around which the film is built Big Fun's "Teenage Suicide, Don't Do It," "Que Será, Será" seems to fit these teenagers who live in a world built out of images and conspicuous consumption. It makes perfect sense that in the suburban world of the three Heathers, Veronica's "teen angst bullshit has a body count" The first verse of the song goes like this:

“When I was just a little girl,
I asked my mother
What will I be?
Will I be pretty, will I be rich?
Here's what she said to me:
Que será, será,
Whatever will be will be.

Barbara Creed has done work exploring the intersection between feminism and postmodernism.[3] Working predominantly with Fredric Jameson's notion of the "nostalgia film," and also the sci-fi and horror genres, Creed examines the collapse of master narratives. While postmodernism typically analyzes this as resulting

from the breakdown of "ideologies which posit universal truths," feminism "would attempt to explain that crisis in terms of patriarchal ideology and the oppression of women and other minority groups." Ultimately Creed finds an alliance between postmodernist and feminist critical methodologies as having "major problems." Furthermore, "the crisis of the master narratives may not necessarily benefit women." HEATHERS is a film wide open to examinations both postmodernist and feminist, but ultimately the oppressed minority group becomes all of suburban youth subculture.

Within the film, Veronica is oppressed by J.D.; he finagles her assistance in three murders. (Throughout the film Veronica's only exchange with her dad/Bill Cm is to repeatedly inform him, "because you're an idiot"; Dad's clearly useless.) At the beginning of the film, she is hopelessly bemoaning her own fate:

“Dear Diary, I want to kill and you have to believe me... it's more than just a spoke in my menstrual cycle... Tomorrow I'll be kissing her aerobicized ass, but tonight let me dream of a world without Heather, a world where I am free.”

Veronica falls for J.D. immediately. A game of strip-croquet leads to both high school romance and murder as their simple cures for high school existentialism. J.D. entices, badgers, and tricks Veronica into getting wrapped up in the murder/"suicides." For example, he lies that the bullets will only stun the victims.

After the second murders, "hippie" teacher Pauline Fleming/ Penelope Milford organizes an emotional "Be-in" in the cafeteria — in order for everyone to "revel in the revealing." In her diary, Veronica writes: "I've seen J.D.'s way; I've seen Miss Fleming's way and nothing has changed. I guess that's Heather's way." Heather Chandler/Kim Walker originally leads "the most powerful clique in school." Her scepter is a prominently large, bright red hair-tie, which matches her red clothes. After her death, the second leader, Heather Duke/ Shannon Doherty simply reaches in to Heather Chandler's locker, removes the red hair-tie and takes her place as the school "mega-bitch."

Regardless who leads the pack, everyone is a loser. To merely examine the film's blank parody and broken chains of signification would overlook the film's primary message: this film robs youth, all youth. It takes away teen subculture and teenage anger and offers instead self-reflexive media humor and simplistic pop culture. From LEAVE IT TO BEAVER to the Kennedy assassination, from "Turbo Dogs" at the "Snappy Snack Shack" to tipping cows, nothing in this film holds value or even meaning.

Even suicide becomes a joke. Eventually, the overweight scapegoat Martha "Dumptruck" Dunnstock/ Carrie Lynn tries to kill herself to gain popularity. She survives her jump from a freeway overpass and ends up in a neck brace, riding a motorized cart around the Westerburg halls. Miss Fleming says, "Whether or not you kill yourself is one of the most important decisions a teenager can make." Heather (Duke) is more practical in referring to Martha: "Just another case of a geek trying to imitate the popular kids and failing miserably."

Life at Westerburg High goes on pretty much unchanged. A third Heather (Heather McNamara/ Lisanne Falk) tries to kill herself but is stopped by Veronica, who asks,

"If everyone jumped off a bridge, would you?" Answers Heather: "Probably." But this Heather soon cheers up and eventually becomes a cheerleader. Veronica is thus the film's "winner," befriending Martha and saving the entire school from J.D.'s using a bomb to create a mass "suicide." Significantly, Veronica's first act as class leader is to pull that red hair-tie off of Heather (Duke): "Heather, my love," Veronica says, "there's a new Sheriff in town." The "Heather way" is thus replaced with the Veronica way. Sure, Veronica will be more beneficent and kind, but nothing has really changed. The cliques remain the cliques — except now four teenagers are dead.

Dick Hebdige has written about subculture and style.[2] While much of his work centers on the punk movement in England, his basic notions about subculture and dominant culture clearly apply to a thoroughly U.S. film like HEATHERS. Dominant culture is continually trying to subsume subculture, continually trying to reform it as a part of dominant culture. Hebdige finds two ways that this is at work.

One way is by *diffusion*, spreading subculture out. As an example of diffusion, the fashion industry picks upon punk styles and then mass-markets them. *Defusion* means how the dominant culture can simply "pull the plug" on some aspect of a subculture. For example, a parent tells a teenager that when he or she grows up things will be better; the teen's problem is trivialized, defused. The original ending of Anthony Burgess' novel *A Clockwork Orange* (the final chapter that was deleted from the U.S. version of the text) offers another prime example of defusion. After a few years have passed, Alex is simply ready to get married, settle down. It's as if the rapes and murders were just a phase — no big deal — since now he's finally become an adult.

HEATHERS robs suburban youth subculture, primarily through the latter method: defusion. The film's humor trivializes the angst typically attributed to youth subculture. The big joke is that three people are killed in the story for nothing — except to rid the school of two sexist jocks and one prima donna Heather. Finally, J.D. kills himself. Veronica has no great change of heart. In the end she does still want to be popular and lead the pack, and she succeeds. Although she seems to operate a bit differently than her two predecessors, she now proudly wears that red hair-tie. Even more ominous, on the way to individuation, Veronica has gunned down J.D., who realizes, "You got power, power I didn't know you had."

When she shoots him and saves the day for Westerburg High, what kind of power does the film give her, and thus give to youth? J.D., wounded and bleeding, straps his bomb to himself, staggers out to the parking lot, and becomes the only true suicide in the film. Meanwhile, Heather, Heather, and Heather, dressed in red, green, and yellow respectively, are only interested in their social standing in the school pecking order. Martha "Dumptruck" and Betty Finn/ Reneé Estevez remain followers, equally hungry for what their weight and poor looks deny them within the film. And the rest of the male characters are either "geeks" or "stoners." The instructors are the same eccentric clichés that frequently surface in teen films, and the parental figures are jokes.

Ultimately, HEATHERS as a film offers the viewer nothing more than purely formalistic cinematic considerations. HEATHERS is clearly a bastard child of Hollywood Cinema. This is how HEATHERS rips off youth. The film plays with the conventions of characterization and it deliberately twists the character-based

causality so common in U.S. film.[5] While most films base plot on clear character motivation defined by psychology, HEATHERS offers none of this basic character psychology until very late in the plot. After J.D. has lied to Veronica about the blanks in the guns they use on Earn and Curt, after he's killed at least three people, only then does HEATHERS show that his actions are based on heredity and environment (his dad is clearly, equally twisted and his mom had killed herself years before). Only so late in the plot development does the film give the kind of character-based clues typically expected very early on in most U.S. cinema. In fact, Christian Slater's performance as J.D. easily can be seen merely as a parody/pastiche of many early Jack Nicholson roles: the tilt of his head, the eyebrows, and even the nasal voice quality are all reminiscent of Nicholson.[6]

HEATHERS obscurs even a simple plot — indeed there is little plot beyond who is wearing that red hair-tie. It leaves only formal values such as light, editing, etc. Pierre Bourdieu writes of the "aesthetic sense as the sense of distinction": [7]

"The aesthetic disposition is one dimension of a distant, self-assured relation to the world and to others which presupposes objective assurance and distance...It unites all those who are the product of similar conditions while distinguishing them from all others."

HEATHERS offers just such a distinction. The film unites all those who recognize and understand filmic references to THE ANDY GRIFFITH SHOW, LEAVE IT TO BEAVER and many other shows, movies, songs, etc.; all those who recognize the jargon and language of high school and the "convenience speak" of the Snappy Snack Shack mini-mart; all those who yearn to act cool and look good as a way to escape their feelings of desperate alienation. Yet at the same time, HEATHERS robs this same teen group of any power except that power which unites them in their cultural void. There is no empowerment toward addressing or redressing any of these issues or concerns. The film does nothing except laugh at problems: no solutions, no answers. Not even murder is ultimately endorsed because the murderer kills himself. The film even deliberately avoids the simplistic, macho, stereotyped love responses that many teen films give as the ultimate solution to every problem.[8]

The distinction that HEATHERS offers is the distinction of distance from the very problems that youth subculture constantly battles; spectators are united in recognizing (and laughing at) images and conspicuous consumption. Spectators are united in *recognizing* filmic devices and artifice. Spectators can recognize the unique language of high school. Early in the film, Veronica says: "Heather told me she teaches people real life. She said, 'Real life sucks losers dry. If you want to fuck with the eagles, you have to learn to fly'." Spectators can recognize the problems of youth: I use my grand IQ to decide what color lip gloss to wear and how to make three keggers before curfew." And most important, spectators can recognize small twists in conventional film language, which contribute to give HEATHERS the stylistic artifice which holds the rest of the emptiness together.

Ultimately, spectators are united as a group who can read twists of film language. This is their final distinction: to recognize style. Style and form are thus endorsed over content. This becomes a kind of formalistic imperialism, which defuses the problems of youth subculture. Such distinction, when offered to spectators, matches what Fredric Jameson calls a "Formalist Projection," in which content

becomes overlooked in favor of identifying "whatever specific dominant elements the individual work of art proposes." [9] In the case of HEATHERS, such "formalist projection" works quite clearly to remove from youth subculture those feelings usually intrinsic to it (alienation, angst, insecurity, peer pressure, etc.), and instead supply youth with a distanced perspective based on structure, style, and form, but not emotion.

Furthermore, Jameson has posited a contemporary breakdown of "cognitive mapping." [10] In HEATHERS, spectators are left with no map of the film's content. Except for using a conventional time period and the teen film form, HEATHERS offers no "map" for predicting or understanding the emotions raised within the plot. Traditional Hollywood causality is missing throughout most of the film. [11] Effects appear before cause. Near the end, Veronica even fakes her own suicide to confuse J.D.: "Dear Diary, Now it's my turn. Let's see how the son of a bitch reacts to a suicide he didn't perform himself?" Yet this faked death isn't clear to spectators until minutes later. And the ultimate causality in the film — why J.D. acts the way he does — is only fully explained in the last scene, when he justifies his plan to blow up the school: "Our burning bodies will be the ultimate protest to a society that degrades us... [it will be] the Woodstock of the 80's."

What signifiers are offered in HEATHERS, usually involving skewed referents, are built on simple disposable consumer items — for example, the red hair-tie. One important consumer item in the film is strangely lacking a film definition of any sort Big Fun's "Teenage Suicide, Don't Do IT." Mentioned a number of times in the film as "number one on the charts," etc., the song's lyrics are never exactly heard anywhere. Significantly, the song is playing on the radio near the end of the film, when Veronica and J.D. break up and he talks about his mother: "They said her death was an accident but she knew what she was doing," As this moment of causality-come-late in the film explains J.D.'s personality, "Teenage Suicide, Don't Do It" is layered underneath the dialog, but not really loud enough to hear. Later in the scene, J.D. shoots the radio into silence with his gun, a pistol at least as big as the guns of most current police/ thriller films. [12] Spectators never hear the song. What exactly does it say — aside from the title? The group Big Fun gets a song credit at the end of the film, but where's the music, the lyrics? This song offers a title, nothing more; within HEATHERS, it becomes only another moment of pastiche. [13]

In fact, the film says, teenage suicide, do it. During the last few scenes, J.D. is shown as psychotic — Veronica even calls him that. Causality is postulated in the final moments, in time for J.D. to tape the bomb to his chest. Knowing he's psychotic validates his suicide.

When the new boss replaces the old, it is not fair to say things have simply stayed the same. The style of the song "Que Será, Será" has changed. The distinction in the plot favors Veronica's leadership over the Heathers' or J.D.'s: she is neither dead nor a cheerleader. But in Westerburg High School, the power structure remains unchanged. For the spectator, distinction operates slightly differently. Viewers are invited to recognize style over content, obvious in the film's postmodern twists of pastiche, kinds of lighting and color, distortions of classic Hollywood film form, and reversals of narrative and character causality. What unites spectators are not in the problems of teens trying to cope with the everyday world, but in the distance

offered from those very problems, a social separation based on identifying film style. These social problems are not only diffused in HEATHERS — laughed at on major cineplex screens, and repeatedly rented out on videocassette — but more importantly these issues are defused, trivialized in a filmic process which emphasizes form over content

To sing "Que será, será" in the face of teen suicide is indeed a revealing comment on contemporary culture. It is a comment which proves dominant culture would rather exploit subcultures, would rather giggle than help, and would rather encourage youth subculture to hurry up and laugh, too, as they join the dominant masses.

NOTES

1. "There are two genres of teen film — the Gee-Life-la-Hard-as-a Teen comedy, spiced with megadoses of angst or T&A, and the Psychopath-Kills-All-the-Teens-But-One flick...HEATHERS — smart, snide and eventually kind of scary — is more or less both." Laurie Ochoa, "HEATHERS: Murder at the Mall," *American Film*, January/February 1989, p. 10.

2. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" in E. Ann Kaplan (ed.), *Postmodernism and Its Discontents* (London: Verso, 1988), p. 16. See also Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (July-August 1984).

3. Barbara Creed, "From Here to Modernity: Feminism and Postmodernism," *Screen* 28 (Spring 1987), 52-66.

4. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979), pp. 92-102.

5. David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 13-18, 177-181, 192-193.

6. "With cocked eyebrow and gleaming eyes, J.D. is a teen version of Jack Nicholson," Laurie Ochoa, p. 10.

7. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 56.

8. I'm thinking of every teen film from REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE to SAY ANYTHING — in which the happy couple jets off to Germany in the end: she with her college scholarship, he to become a kick boxer.

9. Fredric Jameson, *The Prison House of Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 43

10. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," pp. 89-90.

11. Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, pp. 63-69.

12. DIRTY HARRY, TO LIVE AND DIE IN L.A., THE TERMINATOR, COLORS, etc.

13. "But what would happen if one no longer believed in the existence of normal language, of ordinary speech, of the linguistic norm?...That is the moment at which pastiche appears and parody has become impossible." Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," p. 16.

[To top](#) [Current issue](#) [Archived essays](#) [Jump Cut home](#)

Technology and film practice: Hollywood and low-budget alternatives

by Charles Eidsvik

from *Jump Cut*, no. 36, May 1991, pp. 36-42, 73

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As a predominantly establishment medium and art form, cinema carries and promotes ever-new permutations of mainstream ideology. Therefore, left film critics understandably spend most of their time explicating and criticizing films' ideological messages and have little time left for technical analysis. Generally speaking, little is lost by ignoring technique. Two things, however, have occurred in the last decade that require understanding production technology and practice if we are to grasp their significance.

First, incremental shifts in technology have permitted high-budget filmmakers more closely to approximate the “real” when presenting mainstream fantasies, making their messages more persuasive through verisimilitude. Second, an independent film movement, mostly made up of filmmakers with a background in documentary filmmaking, has embarked on fiction filmmaking using a second set of technologies. These technologies were developed by European independent filmmakers to allow them to offer a low-budget aesthetic as an alternative to Hollywood mainstream style. To understand either the current independent film movement in the United States or the dominant cinema it opposes, one must get a basic sense of how filmmakers have used new technology for aesthetic and political ends.

French film theorist Jean Mitry argued that filmmaking always involves trying to make the world into a story. A filmmaker's problems lie in the ways that the world resists that attempt. How much money and technical sophistication a filmmaker has determines whether the world can be bent to fit the story or the story bent to fit the world which the filmmaker finds. Because enough money, skill, and technology enable a filmmaker to bend how the entire universe looks and sounds, almost all of mainstream film's technical and craft arsenal is aimed at that end.

A filmmaker can try, like Wordsworth, to make the everyday seem special and poetic (as in, for example, John Hughes' teenybopper romances such as *SIXTEEN CANDLES* or *PRETTY IN PINK*). Or a filmmaker can, like Coleridge, try to make the extraordinary seem everyday, as in big-effects films such as *COCOON* or *POLTERGEIST* or *WHO KILLED ROGER RABBIT?*) A few films, of which *E.T.* is the best example, try for both romanticisms in a single film. The technology used

makes fantasies consistent and coherent as well as richly detailed. Whatever might contradict the film's fantasy is excluded from our view, so the technology also masks its own existence. The aesthetics of the dominant cinema are illusionist, in that they attempt to mask the means by which the story achieves its effects.

This is, of course, nothing new. Mainstream cinema has promoted a Romantic and Illusionist aesthetic almost since its origins. But the "progress" of cinema's technical apparatus has been primarily to develop tools to better serve the goals of Romantic Illusionism. Whether in lighting, or sound, or camera movement, or just about any other technical area — improved" equipment has almost always meant improving the equipment's ability to create illusions the artifice of which is masked. With the exception of a relatively few very special film genres — most importantly the early German Expressionism of *THE CABINET OF DOCTOR CALIGARI*, the studio musical in its many variations, and some science fiction — few films have flaunted techniques beyond whatever the given conventions of a period and genre would regard as acceptably realistic. "Craftsmanship," as a film concept, has come to mean well-executed illusionism. Within the film industry, neither Brechtian distancing nor gritty realism is acceptable as good film "manners" or good technique.

Behind the industry's insistence on a particular style lie a number of factors. Historically Hollywood has thrived on making slick, expensive entertainments. Film trade unions prefer styles that require large productions because such productions employ more people. More important are economic reasons: the imposition of *de facto* stylistic standards limits the number of films competing for viewers; only those producers with megamillions or industry connections can become industry players. Given the number of potential filmmakers graduated from film schools, and the number who have otherwise developed filmmaking skills, overproduction of films is a danger. Overproduction of films in the 1960s nearly wrecked the film industry: the industry fears it will happen again. Thus a high-cost stylistic standard that effectively limits the number of films in distribution makes business sense. The industry has little interest in trying alternatives to Romantic Illusionism.

Film criticism has helped enforce viewers' expectations of seeing dreams that look real. Illusionist aesthetics so dominate commercial cinema that most critical as well as popular notions of what makes for a "well made" film are derived from Hollywood's sleight-of-hand techniques. Reviewers often dismiss as "amateurs" filmmakers who are uninterested in illusionism or who cannot or do not wish to achieve a slick cover-up of the tricks behind the cinematic illusions. The only obvious exceptions to the mainstream hegemony in production style have occurred when filmmakers have had "critical" organs that were able effectively to promote their own agendas — for example, during the early 1960s in France when *Cahiers du Cinéma* successfully championed the work of filmmakers such as Godard and Rivette. In the United States there is no widely-read film journal which could, like *Cahiers*, promote alternative or non-illusionist aesthetics, and which has survived into the 1980s.

Nevertheless, for filmmakers with progressive political commitments as well as for filmmakers with a background in documentary, both Hollywood's romanticism and the sleigh-of-hand techniques are ethically objectionable because of the gap

between the world and the stories told about it. Hollywood illusionism denies the world's multi-voiced complexity. Further, high-tech illusionism costs so much to achieve that often a commercial filmmaker's loyalties are to financial goals rather than to moral ones. No one just gives a filmmaker money to make a movie. The cash comes from corporations, is covered by thousands of pages of legal contracts, and has to be spent in ways that at least offer the promise of profits. Even though a high-budget filmmaker might wish to speak to the worlds we live in, it is difficult to tell the truth with either the budgets or the terms available for commercial filmmaking.

The exceptions, of course, are fascinating. Spike Lee, in *DO THE RIGHT THING*, succeeded in using Hollywood money to create a powerful, socially critical work, which exists as a hybrid between gritty realism and Hollywood slickness. But Lee, with his ability to hustle publicity and his financial track record, has succeeded precisely as an exception. The industry has shown no signs it wants more Spike Lees messing up their smoothly running operation.

Thus, in the United States (though in a different way and for somewhat different reasons than in Europe) an "alternative" cinema based on low-budget fiction filmmaking has evolved. A kind of creative counterculture within the filmmaking community, this alternative or independent film movement has created a number of films that reject the entire aesthetic of high-budget illusionism. The films are primarily "realist" in that ethics are valued more than aesthetics. For the independent, low-budget filmmaker without the resources to falsify the visual and audio world convincingly, creating a cohesive fiction is possible only to a degree. Special effects, studio sets, spectacle and urban period scenes, and stars are out of the question: they cost too much.

Low budget filmmakers must tell stories set in *our* world rather than in some storytelling universe. Further, they must work in a way that does not require a complete masking of the filmmaker's presence. For filmmakers with a background in documentary, such as Lizzie Borden, Claudia Weill, Haskell Wexler and Robert Young or with a background in serious literature, such as John Sayles, creating new, alternative ways of making films is a simple matter of honesty. The problem for such filmmakers is not whether a work of cinema can be made to look and sound "real." Rather, they pose this question: how to use fictional forms and still serve some of the objectives we normally expect from documentaries? How can a film achieve fiction's compactness, clarity, and narrative force and at the same time engage us in a dialogue about the world we share?

Goals such as these have little to do with making gobs of money or with giving people two hours of escape, so alternative cinema does not compete for Hollywood's business. But low-budget filmmakers must appeal to viewers habituated to mainstream films and must ask these viewers to set aside illusionist aesthetics, at least temporarily. How difficult this request is, is testified to by the very small number of independent filmmakers who have been able to survive financially.

One problem is that illusionist films often "feel" more real than realist films. The game of illusionist filmmaking is to see how much apparent reality can be gotten into a make-believe story. A larger problem comes from the fact that high-budget filmmaking gives pleasure by mimicking effective perception. A high-budget film

gives pleasure because it is *made* for seeing and hearing.

A good chunk of a film's budget is spent making, "dressing," and lighting locations so that when we watch a shot, we quickly see and hear only what is narratively significant. To interpret such highly organized and highlighted visual and audio constructs, we encounter few of the struggles involved in ordinary perception. In everyday perception, our mental processes filter what we see and hear. We do not just look and listen *at* our surroundings; we look and listen *for* what we think might be meaningful, and we disregard the rest. Ordinary reality is disorganized, noisy, and badly lit, so we spend a lot of effort using our eyes and ears to survive.

Illusionist film technique manipulates what the viewer sees and hears so that perceived objects are fully systematized according to the story's needs. Therefore, the cinematic world is easy to look at and listen to, too. Big budgets offer perceptual accessibility. Big-budget films allow the viewer to relax and follow a perceived world designed to make sense and be seen and heard without effort. The camera leads the eye through scenes lit so that we only notice what we are supposed to and then only when narratively appropriate. The sound track gives us exactly what we need and only what we need to easily grasp the story. We hear no extraneous "noise," no voices getting in the way of other voices, no inappropriately echoing walls, no noisy air conditioners. One reason why high-budget films cost so much is that to prepare such visual and audio environments for the audience, a Hollywood crew of 75 can only shoot what will be two minutes of the final film's footage per day.

Though sound, editing, and other technical areas are also difficult and sophisticated, it is the visual area of mainstream filmmaking that is hardest for a low-budget filmmaker to compete with. Mainstream cinema has made an art of slick-looking visuals. To make locations visually controllable, wide-latitude and fast film stocks, lightweight and silent 35mm cameras, and new light systems now make "real" locations controllable no matter what the sun is or is not doing. To cope with the problem of getting cranes and other heavy equipment into locations, new electronic camera and lighting controls now allow filmmakers to separate the actual equipment from the controller.

The camera, mounted on a crane such as the Louma or on a Steadicam, can go into crowds, up stairs, or through windows with seeming effortlessness. Dozens of smaller changes have accompanied these changes, such as better light filtering and control materials, which enhance how images can be manipulated and made easy to watch. Very few of Hollywood's new visual control tools are usable without a relatively large budget. Smooth camera movement is especially expensive because even under the best of circumstances, it is enormously time consuming to set up and execute, and it requires a highly skilled crew.

Easy-viewing aesthetics enhance viewers' complicity with the filmmaker's fantasy. Or rather — and this is absolutely essential for understanding Hollywood's easy-viewing aesthetics and the ideological implications of that — we are swept in or held back, whichever the filmmaker wants. A filmmaker can make the viewer intimate with a character or withhold that intimacy, all without the viewer realizing that manipulation has occurred. As Steven Spielberg's *THE COLOR PURPLE* illustrates, technical control of viewer complicity goes two ways. This film is a fascinating study in how Spielberg manipulates viewing and hearing to lock

viewers into the filmmaker's rather than the characters' perspectives.

As Walter Benjamin long ago pointed out, cinema's viewpoint often is vehicular, proving us with an aestheticized perspective similar to what we experience while riding in a car or train. Just as when riding in a vehicle through a slum, we can look at the slum aesthetically, as spectacle, rather than ethically in terms of human suffering, our cinematic perceptions can be insulated and isolated from what we are seeing through smooth camera movement. Our isolation from what we see is increased when camera moves feel smooth and pre-programmed, leading and predicting the action.

The camera's overt predetermination functions like fate, saying implicitly that the storyteller (and viewer) are ahead of and in control of the story. The filmmaker telegraphs what comes next and how it will all end, and thus turns action into predictable behavior. There are two results: first, preprogrammed movement effectively condescends toward the characters and dehumanizes them by "knowing" what they will do before they do it. Second, it lowers anxiety about what will happen to characters because it makes the viewer the visual accomplice not of the characters but of the storyteller. Complicity and distance can be manipulated shot by shot and scene by scene.

In *THE COLOR PURPLE* Spielberg's usual pattern is to leave the camera static when he wants us to follow and identify with the action, and to go into tracking shots when he wants emotional distance. Olivia's birth and abduction, for example, are statically shot. The camera work depicting Mister's first sexual use of Celie is almost static, except for following Celie's perception to a photo of Sling Avery. Spielberg keeps the camera still to shoot the scene in the store when Corrine shows Celie her baby (whom Celie believes is her own daughter), saying, "I call her Olivia," affirming Celie's hope that Corrine's baby is hers. And when Celie first is forced to shave Mister, the camera is static or follows her motion. Spielberg used this kind of camera work in those scenes where he did not want or need viewer distance.

But the camera stays in motion throughout the march to the graveyard with Celie's mother; it does not just follow along but plays peekaboo with the characters through a spoked wagon wheel. When Mister rides alongside Nettie, obviously intent on rape, Spielberg plays a more complex peekaboo game, showing Mister through trees which rush by in the foreground, aestheticizing each shot and making the whole situation visually playful: Spielberg's style tells the viewer that nothing bad will happen. When Nettie escapes and then is evicted from the farm by Mister, the camera, rather than staying with Celie or Nettie, takes a shortcut, tracks in a rightward direction, with foreground objects whizzing by and separating us from Celie's and Nettie's situation. The camera knows where Nettie and Celie will wind up, and it goes there directly, choreographed in an agenda that effectively belittles Celie's and Nettie's anguish, only coming to a relative accord with the action at the fence. Swooping, rolling, capriciously following handbills blowing in the wind, the camera seems bored with the central story and goes on its own mannered way.

The astonishing thing about Spielberg's craftsmanship is that he is so good. Even when his story contradicts what he is doing with his film, he is able to vehicularize perception successfully enough so that the viewer can remain comfortably

suburbanized, an accomplice of the filmmaker rather than of the characters. We are accustomed to Hollywood's ability to create spectacle. But who would have thought that even Spielberg could turn Alice Walker's novel into a comfortably bourgeois experience?

Whether the kind of material that Alice Walker includes in her novel *should* be so comfortably experienced is an issue Spielberg could not afford or perhaps did not think to ask. Once a filmmaker begins to try to control and aestheticize an environment, making it easy to watch, he has accepted stylization as more important than any statement about what reality is like for his characters. Thus the house that Celie and Mister share may be run-down, but we see it with shafts of light shimmering through smoky air, and the whole thing looks strangely beautiful. Celie and Mister live by a pond, but in Spielberg's world, ponds have no mosquitoes. Once everything becomes arranged for narrative accessibility, that is, to make a pleasant and controlled viewer experience, whatever human reality a story originally spoke to becomes subordinated in importance.

My point is not that Spielberg is a villain. Rather, he knows how to manipulate the narrative style in order to give his audience what they will accept as a good movie experience. Spielberg's technical and stylistic proficiency along with his willingness to avoid staring at unpleasantness make him a trusted name for millions of viewers. But the aesthetic he represents is insidious because it can claim to deal with serious issues. In practice, it only increases bourgeois complacency about these issues. Spielberg co-opts the rage in Walker's novel, smoothes it and makes it acceptable to discuss in suburban comfort. Two messages emerge from an analysis of Spielberg's *THE COLOR PURPLE*. First, that films such as his give audiences an alternative to taking serious issues seriously. And second, that the independent low-budget filmmaker is up against formidably sophisticated competition in any area in which s/he is competing directly with Hollywood.

Historically the independent cinema has taken as its "own" concern subjects and styles that dominant cinema refuse to touch. Since filmmakers such as Spielberg and Coppola (and more recently David Lynch) have entered the mainstream, there are few such subjects. Now what is left for independent and low-budget filmmakers as exclusive terrain are not subjects but attitudes. Dominant cinema cannot afford openly to express the attitudes of disaffected people, be they gays or leftists or ordinary factory workers or anyone else whose attitudes are "marginal."

Obviously, documentary films and videos most directly express the attitudes of the disaffected. In documentaries people can speak for themselves, without having to be part of a fiction. But since the beginning of the Reagan era, documentary films with non-establishment viewpoints have been almost completely shut out of their previous broadcast home at PBS. But even under the best — now long passed — circumstances, documentaries other than concert films have had perhaps the most limited audience in the United States of all film genres. This limit on reception occurred because the documentary has had few resources for selling its subjects and their attitudes to viewers who were not prepared for the hard struggle to see meaning and order in, for example, cinema-verité-style documentaries, and who were not willing to listen to a voice-over analysis of documentary material. For many of us, the documentary film is the ideal way with which a filmmaker can try to tell the truth. But the documentary is not a form many people are willing to watch.

Low-budget fiction films, like documentaries, rake seriously the struggle involved in making meaning. For them, this struggle is based ethically in the view that meaning is to be found in real contexts and people rather than imposed upon them. To believe that meaning can and should be wrested from "found" realities rather than just invented is also the faith of the low-budget fiction filmmaker, just as it is the faith of the documentarist. But this faith also points to a faith in communicating unpopular or "marginal" points of view. Narrative fiction, in whatever form, can potentially immerse audiences in the logic and perceptions of non-mainstream viewpoints.

The problem for a filmmaker who wishes to communicate attitudes outside of the mainstream is complicated by the dominance of Romantic Illusionism. How can a filmmaker ask viewers (and reviewers) to treat his or her film as something deliberately "other" than a cheaply made "B" or "C" picture? Somehow the filmmaker must "switch off" viewer expectations of seeing mainstream narration, and must introduce the attitudes and techniques he proposes as alternatives. One approach is to say up-front, "This film is different."

The most direct attempt to switch off mainstream expectations I have seen in U.S. alternative cinema occurs in *SUBWAY RIDERS*, made by Amos Poe and Johanna Heer in 1981. The opening sequence shows Poe rejecting an offer to sell his script to Hollywood. The story then gets ultra-low-budget in look and sound, but also introduces a color-coded stylization, in which each main character's mood is shown by tinting the image. This stylization is pushed further by double casting the main character, a schizophrenic saxophone player who regularly tries to murder whoever hears him play. Poe and Heer made a film fully within German Expressionist terms and at the same time one that has the feeling of documentary realism. That Poe deliberately disconnected viewer expectations for a normal movie is part of the reason *SUBWAY RIDERS* became a cult classic, especially in Europe.

Even more successful was Jim Jarmusch's approach to *STRANGER THAN PARADISE*. Jarmusch simply refused the entire shot structure accepted in film history since Porter's (1904) *THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY*. He shot each scene with one shot, mostly from a fixed camera position. The result was that his defiance of traditional aesthetics "read" as clearly as his primitivistic aesthetic, and audiences reacted positively to his story.

Often, however, filmmakers make little attempt either to proclaim their non-standard aesthetics or to hide them. John Sayles, for example, uses a documentary-like sound quality in his work. In *LIANNA* and for a good part of *THE BROTHER FROM ANOTHER PLANET*, shotgun and similarly directional, "perspective" microphones signal his film as different from the extraordinarily smooth-listening Hollywood mainstream. It would have been easier for him, and because it could have saved film stock, probably cheaper, just to make temporary recordings (known as "scratch tracks") on location and, as Hollywood filmmakers do, to dub in cleanly synchronized dialogue later. But Sayles seems to like the fact that his films sound like extremely well-made documentaries; the rough location sound and visual texture of Sayles' films are part of his artistic signature. Sayles is not alone in hanging on to some of the feel of documentary in his work. That feel and the claim of independent cinema to political or social relevance form part of low-budget aesthetics. Low-budget aesthetics are sometimes almost as much a frame of

mind as they are a restriction imposed by budget.

The unavoidable struggle — and the feel — of low-budget films come with using real interiors as film locations. This practice stands in contrast to mainstream filmmaking, where interior locations are faked in a studio. There, “wild” walls silently roll aside so the director always has some appropriate place to put the camera and equally appropriate places to put the lights and light-control devices such as reflectors and scrims. Low-budget filmmaking usually conveys the sense that the camera and lights went wherever the camera person could find place to put them. Kick lights and “specials” to outline and illuminate actors' features are seldom used. Often background lighting on walls is clumsy or simply (by mainstream standards) inadequate.

Almost always, low-budget features betray an awkwardness or obviousness about the lighting and camera work — in that we are aware how scenes have been artificially lit for the camera and arranged so that they can be shot simply. Characters' movements often are not blocked to coordinate smoothly with the camera and lighting, so we rarely see everything from quite the best angle. Sound bounces around in ways that reveal the struggle of the microphone boom operator. Often, to avoid boom shadows, filmmakers use highly directional but distinct sounding “shotgun” microphones, which give dialogue a documentary sound.

Often the interiors used in independent films have a borrowed look. On Hollywood sets, art directors and set dressers work the set over carefully to see that each room expresses the personality of the characters who supposedly live in it. Set dressing enhances the moods of the scenes that occur there. In low-budget films the interiors often seem to reveal not the characters' personalities but the personalities of the people whom the room was borrowed from.

For those of us who often inhabit other people' spaces, this kind of contingency adds an element of believability. But the believability is not illusionist. Rather, it invokes an a viewing attitude that, for lack of a better word, might be called “Brechtian.” Brecht's “*Verfremdungseffekt*,” his so-called alienation principle, did not come from an attempt to alienate the audience. Rather, Brecht wanted to help audience members see social realities not as “natural” givens to be ignored but as something “strange,” contingent, and therefore changeable. Often low-budget films achieve this result paradoxically, by foregrounding the tension between story and setting. The effect is that the story becomes more than a story. It becomes a story “about,” a story that in its physicality is connected to the viewer's world.

In these and other ways the unmalleability of physical existence asserts itself as the low budget film's co-author. Once one has seen an interior setting, one knows and accepts that, if the camera moves around, it will move where there would be room to move a real camera in a real room of the sort one is seeing. But a kind of visual and audio awkwardness testifies to the reality of the settings; and the reality of the settings testifies to relations between the film's world and the world we inhabit in our everyday lives.

The clumsiness of real interiors gives a fictional film the feet of documentary. Documentary's impact comes from viewers' sense that within any given scene, they somehow experience actual space and time with the people filmed, whom the viewers recognizes being members of the real world. The documentary cinema-

verité filmmaker, at best, asks viewers to extend their ethical concerns from everyday life — basically the concern for common decency — to the people portrayed on the screen, whether those are institutionalized inmates in TITICUT FOLLIES, workers and patients in HOSPITAL, or a Bible salesman in the Maysles' SALESMAN. A sense of the camera's restrictions in real space is part of the sense of "there-ness," of immediacy, that documentaries at their best give. This sense that the story is not preordained, but rather is risky, contingent, and even quirky, is a quality that both cinema-verité and the new, low-budget film seek to embrace.

Often there is also a rough technical feeling to low budget U.S. work, whether in documentary or fiction form, not merely because the filmmaking teams have little experience or taste for smooth illusion, but also because of the equipment used. Around 1970 a number of European filmmakers such as the Swede, Rune Ericson, began modifying film equipment made for television so that it would function for low-budget theatrical filmmaking. Filmmakers in small European countries such as Sweden often found the costs of working with 35mm equipment prohibitive. The most striking modification was called "Super-16mm," which basically involves widening the image area of ordinary 16mm film so it can serve as the basis of a blowup to 35mm film. Though the results sometimes are marginal, improved film stocks and lenses have made it possible to get visual quality on Super-16mm that is acceptable for most film festival and "specialized" film theater audiences.

The lightweight format has two advantages. First, it allows small film crews accustomed to documentary work to make fiction films with lightweight, familiar equipment. Second, for interior location filmmaking, 16mm has advantages over the professional, 35mm gauge. For an equivalent amount of light and similar framing, 16mm provides around four times the depth of field as 35mm. In small spaces with low light, this advantage is perhaps as important as using a smaller crew.

Cable television and videocassette sales and rentals have been the main financial markets for independents for most of the 1980s. A film is shot on 16mm or Super-16 and blown to 35mm for festivals and a limited theatrical "publicity" run. It is then given wider release on video. This production and distribution procedure has become an alternative-cinema staple. For example, John Sayles' RETURN OF THE SECAUCUS SEVEN and LIANNA were done on 16mm; Robert Young's THE BALLAD OF GREGORIO CORTEZ was done on Super-16. So were Bill Sherwood's PARTING GLANCES and Lizzie Borden's WORKING GIRLS. So long as a filmmaker avoids a lot of long shots (where a 35mm original is startlingly better), is careful with lighting, and composes meticulously, these "blow-up" films provide a way of doing distributable work cheaply.

But because visual quality is just barely good enough, low-budget films often look better on cable or video than on a big screen. The low visual quality of home video and TV sets makes any technical roughness in lower-budget films less noticeable than on a large screen. In private setting, documentary-like realism may prove particularly effective, in that the U.S. documentary tradition is primarily a television rather than a theatrical tradition. Further, the home setting is where independent cinema's other close "relatives" are perhaps most apt to be encountered in this videotape age. These include television series deriving from literature and European semi-realist fiction films such as MY BEAUTIFUL

LAUNDRETTE or LETTER TO BRESCHNEV (both shot using low budget techniques). Though television screens do not convey a film's power in the way a theatrical screen does, neither does the home screen announce a film's budget problems.

Nevertheless, the non-traditional visual and audio aspects of realistic low-budget films create problems for the films in reaching an audience. Cable and video sales depend on how well known a film has become through theatrical release. Alternative cinema needs ancillary television and video sales because even under the best of circumstances, independent films usually lose money for their theatrical distributor and must be cross-collateralized via small-screen sales. Specialty film distributors and exhibitors and cable and video buyers do not like the onus of trying to place films that do not look "well-made" or "artistic." For a filmmaker to sell a film at all, it must somehow have gotten pre-validation via film festival prizes or newspaper or television reviews. And at film festivals, organizers and judges and specialty film exhibitors watch low-budget realist films on large theatrical screens in competition with far better financed, crafted, and aesthetically pleasing European "Art" films. To get good reviews or prizes in this kind of context, a film must not merely be good or ethically important, it must somehow be very "interesting" or "important."

A "distributable" film not only has an important theme but also stimulates viewers' and critics' interest on other than thematic grounds. The theatrical audience for nontraditional movies in theaters does not come from the counterculture. Such an audience contains two distinct kinds of viewer, both of whom get their stimulus for going to a film primarily through print media. One kind of viewer is the film buff who goes to anything which a favorite newspaper film reviewer has found "interesting." The other kind of viewer is interested in a particular subject — say, ecology or homosexuality or abandoned children. Both kinds of viewers must be reached for a film even marginally to be successful. To reach either kind of viewer a film must develop a critical following, not with other filmmakers but with critics and reviewers. U.S. independent cinema has in no way solved this problem of building an audience.

Critics and reviewers rarely know much about the technical, ethical, and aesthetic issues that differentiate low-budget realist films from both mainstream films and the more stylistically-oriented European art film. Except in politically committed film journals such as *Cineaste* and *Jump Cut*, in left weeklies such as *In These Times*, and in the rare daily or weekly with a critic friendly to alternative film, independent films rarely get discussed in print at all. There is very little in the way of a film criticism counter-establishment that can write in terms relevant to the situations of independent and realist film. The body of such film criticism has remained almost as small in relation to mainstream criticism as has independent film in relation to Hollywood. The difficulty of such a situation is that only inadequate ways exist for letting people know which independent films are worth going out of the way to see (or rent or buy on tape) and why. Even more important, for works outside of easy-viewing Romantic traditions, viewers often need perceptual and ideological preparation for what they will see and hear. It is (or should be) one of the jobs of criticism to help in that preparation.

This is not to say that it makes sense for progressive or committed film critics to

praise independent films simply because they are independent, or cheap films simply because they are cheap. The independent film movement has many directors trying to use the independent scene only as a springboard to Hollywood. Furthermore, historically it derived from the U.S. Independent Movement of the 1960s and often continues that movement's inexcusable attitudes. Sexism, rampant and often irresponsible individualism, and utter lack of social concerns comprise part of the legacy which the independent movement inherited.

A few name-brand, mainstream directors — the Spike Lees and Oliver Stones — attempt (from whatever perspective) to deal with realities in their films in ways that send us out of the theater thinking and talking about our lives and society. In this sense, it would be irresponsible for a committed critic to ignore a progressive mainstream film such as *CRY FREEDOM* in order to give space to an independent filmmaker such as Rob Neilson's work. But the independent low-budget movement remains the only possible base for filmmakers on the left or filmmakers dealing with minority viewpoints or realities.

In dealing with film art, which is dominated by a well-financed establishment, perhaps those who believe in committed cinema must eventually make the distinction offered by Satyajit Ray between "our" films and "theirs," between films made because their makers have something to say, and those that simply are meant to be fun to see. For some of us, Hollywood's romanticism and ideology are forever foreign, forever "theirs" not "ours." If as critics we wish to promote a cinema which is more honest about the world we live in, as viewers we must learn to see and hear in new ways, in ways appropriate to films outside of Hollywood's illusionist tradition. And to learn to see and hear in new ways, we will have to begin to understand the technology with which "their" films and "our" films are made. We will have to learn to analyze how illusionism is achieved and how it works to bootleg its ideological messages into our eyes and our dreams. We will have to learn to undermine illusionism's control by revealing the tricks behind Spielbergian illusions, and by saying there are interesting alternatives to simply accepting what Hollywood wants to offer.

And we will have to accept that we need to start with print, start with the specialized film audience, start with the only place we can compete. Right now independent cinema in the United States, though well-organized, is fragile because it has no critical voice. Perhaps we must create the conditions under which to develop that voice.

Introduction: African and Black Diaspora film/video "and Shine filmed on"

by Mark A. Reid

from *Jump Cut*, no. 36, May 1991, pp. 43-46

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Film production in Africa and the African Diaspora is slowly gaining recognition within film studies programs. Like the film industry, film studies has its own form of determinism which shapes how scholars, students and the publishing industry discuss African and African Diasporic film and video works. Initially, any film or video containing a visible group of black performers was errantly deemed a black film. I will not list examples but one needs only to refer to recent articles on "black film" and ask two questions: Who is behind the camera and who wrote the script? [1][[open notes in new window](#)]

On the one hand, I concur with Henry Louis Gates who writes of

"blackness that it existed as some mythical and mystical absolute, an entity so subtle, sublime, and unspeakable that only the very black' racial initiate could ever begin to trace its contours, let alone force it to utter its darkest secrets...our critics' hermeneutical circle was a mere tautology; only the black people could think black thoughts, and therefore only the black critic could rethink, and hence criticize, a black (film) text." [2]

Nevertheless, I ask two questions: When and where do black film technicians enter to gain some discernible control over their filmic image? And when and where are the thoughts of black critics and scholars written into the interpretation of such images that heretofore have remained exclusively the domain of non-black merchants of culture? Must the response remain in the segregated space of the black press as it has been since the 1900s? U.S. cultural institutions in general and film studies in particular must reject this not so subtle, apartheid system of cultural production. And the Afrocentric discourse on and interpretation of black film must avoid the pitfalls of racial essentialism, homophobia and sexism. When we resist the overdetermined will of Anglo-American cultural imperialism — we face an equally tautological circle of subtle and sublime racial secrets.

This special section, "Africa/Black Diaspora," dispels the illusion of monolithic forms of blackness and links African film with its black diasporic equivalent in the United States and England. As some of the articles included in this section suggest, blacks must control a few means of production in order to create an ideology that is

neither determined by the hegemonic visions of white filmmakers, white feminists and critics, nor limited by the hegemony of black masculinist and heterosexist value systems. Recall how certain types of U.S. history have framed and narrated the lives of visible people of color and women. What changes occur when the Other produces films to interpret his/her communal stories? Such production permits difference. I admit it is not so much a question of the author's racial and/or gender difference. But media production in the hands of the Other raises the question of how monolithic allegiance to one's race or gender permits hegemony over the social and filmic construction of the many racial and gendered Others.

BLUES FILMS FOR BLUES PEOPLE

Film scholars cannot merely discuss abstract theoretical notions about black film and the progressive aspects of black filmmakers and video artists like Charles Burnett, Michelle Parkerson and Marlon Riggs. The critic must also scrutinize the observations of those who feel racially and/or politically compelled to celebrate black filmmakers' success when their films contain homophobic and or sexist elements used to entertain our baser desires. Permitting homophobia and misogyny in black film impedes the development of a progressive black film practice, and therein, it allows a double standard of film criticism.

Black cinema is a blues cinema. Blues songs have traditionally spoke for psychological and social liberation, and black film should do no less. The blues, according to Larry Neal,

“are basically defiant in their attitude toward life. They are about survival on the meanest, most gut level of human existence. They are, therefore, lyric responses to the facts of life. The essential motive behind the best blues song is the acquisition of insight, wisdom.”[3]

This special section on black film covers francophone and anglophone African cinemas. It gives equal coverage to African American involvement in Hollywood and those blacks who avoided Hollywood so as to maintain an independent distance from major studios. Most important, this section discusses the work of two black gay filmmakers and their filmic commitment to the black community and their gay brothers. Each article here employs different strategies to discuss and analyze the various ideologies that construct and control black-oriented film production, distribution and exhibition. Hopefully, the articles inform film scholars, students and the publishing industry about the polyphonic nature of contemporary black cinema which might be described as the Blackness of Blackness(es).

Four essays discuss different facets of the African film experience in Africa and in the West. I tackle the problems involved in cross-cultural film editing and French governmental sponsorship of francophone African film in “Producing African Cinema in Paris,” a 1986 interview with Andrée Daventure, a white French woman. I recorded this interview in late 1985 and early 1986 when French rightwing politician Jean-Marie LePen, a French equivalent of David Duke, gained popularity among the working class French electorate. During this period, the French economy faced a recession and the Socialist government could not inhibit increases in anti-Semitism (against French-born Arabs and Jews) and racism. Interestingly, in this political period France reduced its commitment to francophone African

cinema as well as other state sponsorship of the arts.

Concurrent with the upsurge in French fascism, Harlem Dsir, a Paris-born West Indian, created the political organization "S.O.S. Racisme," which uses art, music and grassroots politics to combat anti-Semitism and racism. The Daventure interview and the political situation which surrounds my meeting with Andrée Daventure are relevant to the political and cultural situation in the United States today. Our nation needs to renew its economic commitment to regional multicultural arts programs like San Francisco's Cine Acción and San Antonio's Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center.

Additionally, activists in the United States have yet to create an interracial, multi-ethnic group that equals the importance of S.O.S. Racisme. The United States often seems to create movements whose longevity can be measured by the political aspirations of one individual, and whose breadth of interests is no more varied than the trajectory of one who gazes at his mirror image. This is why U.S. cultural institutions, unlike those in France, Belgium, Germany and Great Britain, are late to recognize the importance of promoting the development of film production and scholarship by visible people of color who reside in the United States.

In "Women in Sembene's Film," Gorham H. Kindem and Martha Steele analyze various aspects of female characterization in the films of Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembene. Their analysis includes a description of the socio-historical context of Senegalese women from which, they argue, Sembene borrows to create his female roles. Their essay also discusses why African cinema is dependent on western markets as opposed to the indigenous national film markets, distributors and exhibitors in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Kindem-Steele article expresses the centrality of African women in history and notes how Sembene's marxist realist vision has not been quieted by his economic dependence on the West.

Ntongela Masilela's "COME BACK AFRICA and South African Film History" continues the focus on African film and provides a brief overview of white South African film history. Masilela closes his essay by reflecting on the inability of black South Africans to develop a black South African film tradition. Masilela notes that Lionel Ngakane, the first black South African filmmaker now exiled in London, "has been unable in exile to establish the guideposts of the South African cinema." Nevertheless, Lionel Ngakane, as an ANC film representative, is instrumental in maintaining ties with other African and non-African filmmakers. Ngakane has successfully enlisted filmmakers to use their cameras to combat South Africa's system of racial apartheid.

In "Anglophone African Media," Frank Ukadike, a Nigerian film scholar teaching in the U.S., describes how Nigerian audiences have identified with the heroes they've viewed in foreign films. Ukadike argues that "mobile cinemas" exhibited foreign films and promoted non-African cultural values in the most remote rural areas of Nigeria. He adds that the absence of rural state-sponsored broadcast media (radio and television) increases the detrimental socioeconomic effects of these foreign films. His essay also discusses the difference between the anglophone and francophone film industries, describes the roots of this difference as reflecting the policies of the British and French colonial administrators, and gives insightful commentaries on the postcolonial film and television industries in Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria.

Four essays look at the African-American experience in Hollywood and in the independent artistic liberated zones. Nicholas Wellington's essay "Hollywood's Apartheid" scrutinizes the conventions of recent Hollywood film dramatizations of racial apartheid in South Africa. Wellington correctly states, "At the heart of apartheid is the classification (and oppression of/preference for) of people on the basis of their color, race, ethnicity, gender, class, language, history." He finds that film's conflation of various differences to one of race permits media to work within a framework of black/ white, good/ bad, tyrants/ victim-heroes dualisms, which generate simplistic dramas. His essay then analyzes how these dualisms structure the film narratives of the action film *LETHAL WEAPON 2* and the family melodramas *CRY FREEDOM* and *A DRY WHITE SEASON*.

Similarly, my essay, "The U.S. Black Family Film," describes the bi-cultural tensions which determine how two African American integrationist dramas were produced and marketed during the dawning of the United States' own anti-apartheid movement for African American civil rights. Continuing the focus on African American involvement in the film industry, Elizabeth Jackson presents interviews with Dr. Roland Jefferson, independent producer, and Barbara McCullough, independent filmmaker. Jefferson criticizes black middle-class reluctance to finance black films, and McCullough discusses the problems that beset a black independent filmmaker, warning against placing too much authority in the hands of an untested crew.

With José Arroyo's "The Films of Isaac Julien" and Chuck Kleinhans' two pieces on Marlon Riggs, the Special Section on "Africa/Black Diaspora" takes up a formerly closeted subject which had dared not speak its name — the creative and political vision of black gay filmmakers. Unlike Shirley Clarke's *PORTRAIT OF JASON*, the works of Isaac Julien and Marlon Riggs are generated by a black gay consciousness which prevails in both the technical and performance arenas. In "The Films of Isaac Julien," José Arroyo gives a close reading of three works by Julien. Arroyo argues that the works deconstruct the already-existing colonial discourse and simultaneously permit a polyphony of black realities in terms of issues of sexual orientation, race, gender and class. In citing filmmaker-theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha, "There is a Third World in Every First World," Arroyo discusses how Julien's films critique blacks who adopt already-existing colonial discourses to demean impoverished blacks, women and homosexuals. Arroyo again borrows from Trinh to describe how Julien's works articulate a "looking back" and "talking back" form of visual and auditory resistance. Chuck Kleinhans and Julia Lesage's "Interview with Marlon Riggs" provides an intimate look at one of African America's most gifted video artists. Riggs informs us about his pre-production decisions and how and why he made *TONGUES UNTIED*. The interview is not merely a statement about video production or about a black video artist. Riggs also reveals important facts about the artistic movements and folk culture of black urban gay America.

In Kleinhans's essay "Mainstreams and Margins," Riggs' two videos, *ETHNIC NOTIONS* and *TONGUES UNTIED* are contrasted and analyzed with respect to each video's educational value and each video's socio-political importance. The article scrutinizes the textual and extra-textual elements which interact to create our understanding of each video and its place in U.S. popular culture. Kleinhans weighs the limitations of Riggs's use of a conventional expository format for

ETHNIC NOTIONS. The format is best suited for classroom situations because college students are familiar with and can easily draw information from a linear narrative that treats racism as a past social inequity. In contrast, TONGUES UNTIED has a complex narrative structure and treats a more controversial issue — black gay political activism. Undoubtedly, TONGUES UNTIED's unconventional and discontinuous narrative style as well as its black gay affirmation resist "mainstream" support, financial and otherwise. Unlike ETHNIC NOTIONS which was produced for broadcast on PBS stations, TONGUES UNTIED is distributed by Frameline, which exclusively markets gay films and videos. Equally marginal is TONGUES UNTIED's audience, which is composed of a mix of radical feminists, progressives and gays (women and men). It is the sort of audience who resist different forms of already existing colonial discourses regardless of their sources.

NOTES

1. For an understanding of the African American mythological figure "Shine," see Larry Neal, *Visions Of A Liberated Future*, ed. Michael Schwartz (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1990), pp. 7-23.
2. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), p. 45.
3. Neal, p. 108.
4. To my knowledge and acknowledging its limitations, no U.S. film journal or book on film, with the exception of *Black Film Review* 3.3 (1987) and 5.3 (1989) and this issue of JUMP CUT, has devoted an issue or chapter on the work of gay black filmmakers or the visual representation of black homosexuality. It is surprising that gay film scholars, feminists and blacks have yet to direct their critical energies toward the poetry and vivid images in the films of Isaac Julien, Marlon Riggs, Michelle Parkerson, and other black gay artists. Probably the nexus of racism and homophobia permit this silence of the lambs when it comes to these pioneering black artists.

Emitai and *Ceddo* Women in Sembene's films

by Gorham H. Kindem and Martha Steele

from *Jump Cut*, no. 36, May 1991, pp. 52-60

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"Africa can't develop without the participation of its women."

— Sembene Ousmane[1][[open notes in new window](#)]

Sembene's films depict women playing a crucial role in Africa's development. Within the films' narratives, women characters provide necessary connections between the past and the future, the traditional and the contemporary, the individual and the community. Sembene does not uncritically portray women as passive objects of male desire. Unlike in many Hollywood films, female characters in Sembene's films act as agents of both group solidarity and social change. They do not represent commodities and possessions to desire and obtain. Rather, Sembene's films depict women as the salt of the earth among the people whom Frantz Fanon has called "the wretched of the earth." [2] They provide both the cohesive force that has traditionally held African society together and the gunpowder that will precipitate future social revolution. This paper will examine these aspects of female characterization in Sembene's films, in particular, in *EMITAI* (1971) and *CEDDO* (1976).

Sembene's films suggest that women in traditional African society held a more exalted place than colonialist and neocolonialist suppression has allowed them.

Furthermore, the films directly connect sexual oppression and exploitation to political oppression and economic exploitation. Sembene consistently exposes the patriarchal imperialism of both Islamic/Arab and Christian/ European colonialism, which attempted to displace earlier matriarchal forces and diminish the importance of women in African society. *CEDDO* and *EMITAI* assume that within certain West African ethnic groups, women had considerable status. Traditionally several Senegalese ethnic groups, including Wolof and Serer, relied upon matrilineage, or they practiced gender egalitarianism, as in Diola society.

Sembene's images of African women come out of distinctive social, historical, and aesthetic contexts. He uses narrative structures and cinematic styles that differ markedly from those of Hollywood cinema. Although Sembene's work stands in opposition to Hollywood and Western commercial filmmaking in general, it complexly depends on some Western markets and sources of capital, including film

festivals and art film distributors and exhibitors.

For the film critic looking at these films in a Western context, although their interpretation cannot be completely divorced from cinema theory and filmmaking practice in the West, it is important to try to approach African cinema on its own terms.[3] Our approach, therefore, will use Western film theory to analyze Sembene's images of African women. This theory allows us partially to define what is present in Sembene's films through implications that we can draw from what is absent. We also wish to reverse this process, so that, as Western film analysts and practitioners, we learn about our own blind spots from Third World cinema.

Sembene's films cannot be fully understood outside of their cultural context, and our understanding of that context is necessarily limited and distorted. We cannot fully escape our cultural perspective and view Sembene's films as would Senegalese viewers or even other African viewers. We must be skeptical about the ethnocentrism of our film theory and critical practice, and we must not assume that our perspective is either neutral or objective. My hegemonic attempt to impose Western concepts upon Sembene's films has important implications regarding current approaches to film theory and practical criticism, such as psychoanalysis and Marxist realism. While taking up the specific topic of women's characterization in these films, we also wish to deal with the critical problems of analyzing such work.

SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS (Kindem)

Women's roles in Africa and specifically Senegal today derive from a complex set of social and historical circumstances, which provide the cultural context for interpreting Sembene's films. Ethnic traditions and foreign (primarily Arab and European) influences have affected Senegalese women's current status and social roles. About 70% of Senegal's population is Muslim, 15% Catholic, and the remaining 15% traditional African spiritualist (most Muslims and Catholics in Senegal probably also adhere to some aspects of traditional spiritualism). Patriarchal attitudes toward women are fairly widespread, including the practice of polygamy as a sign of male status and wealth. In fact, Sembene satirized polygamy in *MANDABI* (1968) and *XALA* (1974). Some analysts, such as Françoise Pfaff, have argued that Sembene's portrayal of women has certain links with ethnic traditions in "matriarchal African societies in which matrilineage ensured the social and cultural continuity of given communities whose law and custom center on the mother," as well as some African religions, which

"assert the presence of female water goddesses, from whom life proceeds. Sembene, who is a product of these cultures, intimates that African woman is earth...and 'Mother Africa' the genetrix of new Africa." [4]

There is genetic reinforcement for this cultural concept, which connects the human species to a common female ancestor from Africa. Recent biochemical research of "matrilineal" mitochondrial DNA (where mutations take place five to ten times faster than in cells inherited through both fathers and mothers) in the placentas of women of various racial groups has suggested that all humans descended from "African Eve" less than 200,000 years ago. We are not descended from "Java man," "Peking man," or Greece's "Petalona man," for these earlier forms "did not

contribute any surviving...lineages to the gene pool of our species." [5] We would like to acknowledge that hidden underneath the cultural specificity of Sembene's female characters — the central focus of this paper — lies the inheritance of an African woman who may be our common ancestor, and Sembene's films help us explore her continuing legacy within West Africa.

Senegalese society and Senegalese film have historically been caught in the grip of several forms of foreign domination and exploitation. Despite achieving its political "independence" from France in 1960, Senegal continues to be economically dependent upon the West. For example, while its closest ties have clearly been to France, Senegal was also one of the few African countries favored by the Reagan administration because of its "political stability."

Senegal also has a long history of succumbing to outside Arab and Islamic influences dating from at least the 1500s. It became a West African center of the European and American slave trade in the 1600s. It was a French colony from the 1600s to 1960. Depicting moments within this rather bleak history of outside influence, Sembene's films focus upon historical instances of African independence and resistance to foreign oppression. Thus *EMITAI* shows Diola resistance to France's conscripting African men and extorting rice for the war effort during WWII, and *CEDDO* depicts Wolof/Serer resistance to Islamic patriarchy during the 17th and 18th centuries.

Senegal was connected to North Africa by the overland and caravan trade time running through Tombouctou in what is now the neighboring country of Mali. Many traders and shop owners in Senegal today are from the Middle East, including many Lebanese. That trade route forged strong links with Arab culture. In the first contacts of Senegal with Europeans, Portuguese maritime explorers "discovered" Senegal in 1445. The westernmost point of Africa, Dakar or more specifically Goree Island became a way station for slaves being transported to Europe or to the Americas.

As a colonial power, France established a policy of "assimilation" that indoctrinated "native," ruling, educated elites into French culture at French universities. France's colonial policy tended to ignore traditional social organization and culture. In Senegal, in particular, French colonialists sometimes sided with Muslim leaders in opposition to traditional ethnic elites, such as the Ceddo, because the policies of the former were often more favorable towards "free" trade. This kind of favoritism existed despite Christian objections to Islamic practices, such as polygamy. Colonialists generally ignored ethnic distinctions, languages, and customs; instead, they erected artificial borders and barriers between Africans. They exploited Africa's natural and human resources.

Colonialism's legacy has shaped the structures, organization, and control of Senegal's culture industries since its "independence" from France in the late 1950s. In all of French-speaking West Africa, just two French-based companies have traditionally controlled the film industry. COMMACCIO and SECMA. About 55% of the films they distribute are from Hollywood, 30% from France, and about 15% from India, Egypt, or Italy. Senegal has less than 100 film theaters for 3.5 million people. There is a very small market for domestically produced feature films, and the various West African states have no kind of collaborative organization for African film production or distribution. Sembene has been quoted as saying, "It's

easier for me to get my film shown in Paris than in Bamako." [6]

Sembene's films also have faced severe government censorship — not only within Senegal but in all of French-speaking West Africa. *EMITAI* was banned in all African countries. *XALA* was subjected to eleven separate cuts before it could be released in Dakar. The Princess' killing of the iman (an Islamic religious leader) in *CEDDO* undoubtedly caused the Senegalese government, one of the film's major sponsors, to ban the film, since powerful Islamic brotherhoods exercise considerable power within that government. Government censorship of Sembene's social critiques of colonialism, neo-colonialism, bourgeois society, and Islamic patriarchy indicates the degree to which his revolutionary subject matter elicits the wrath of patriarchal and bourgeois forces in West African society. Furthermore, Sembene's sources of financial support are extremely limited, which, along with domestic political problems, probably accounts for the relative infrequency with which he has produced films.

Language differences cause divisions and oppression in Senegalese society. They also cause difficulty in terms of film financing. French is the official language of Senegal's government bureaucracy and of private industry, while the average Senegalese commonly relies upon one or more ethnic languages for everyday conversation, primarily Wolof but also Diola or Mandinka in southern Senegal and ethnic neighborhoods in urban areas throughout the country. Sembene began making films in the early 1960s partly because he wanted to reach a broader audience than could be reached by his novels, which he had published in French at a time when Wolof was not a written or published language.

Film scripts had to be written in French, and in Sembene's early films the characters often spoke French. His later films utilize native languages much more fully, especially Wolof and Diola. His use of French in earlier films, such as *LA NOIRE DE...* (*BLACK GIRL*, 1964), reflects the demands of French financing and the films' expected distribution markets in France as well as French-speaking West Africa. *MANDABI* received partial funding from France's Centre Nationale de la Cinématographie Française, which required that two different versions of the film be made: one in French and the other in Wolof. *TAUW* (1970), a 16mm short financed by the National Council of the Church of Christ, was made in Wolof, *EMITA!* in Diola and French, and *CEDDO* in Wolof. In *EMITAI*, *XALA*, and the Wolof version of *MANDABI*, a character's use of French is manipulated aesthetically for a political effort. It indicates his or her complicity with colonialism or neo-colonialism, rather than any deference to Sembene's sources of financial support. Sembene also depends to some extent upon his U.S. distributor, New Yorker Films, for financial support, but it is unlikely that this relation places restrictions or requirements upon his filmmaking other than the need for English subtitles.

SEMBENE'S FILMS AND REALIST AESTHETICS (Kindem)

Several commentators have applied realist aesthetics to Sembene's films. Françoise Pfaff suggests that Sembene "reproduces, reshapes and reconstructs actual facts into a new reality which may be close to objective reality" (Pfaff, p. 44). Carrie Dailey Moore's (Carrie D. Sembene) 1973 dissertation at Indiana University describes Sembene's aesthetic approach to film as both social-realist and neorealist:

"His films are neo-realist because they take the sides of the victims. He poses the problems of the social setting, and man's inability to live harmoniously in it. The implication is that if the problems treated are insoluble in terms of existing society, then it is society that must be changed." [7]

William Van Wert has suggested that Sembene's *EMITAI* is at once his most Eisenstein-like and his most neorealist film, and Roy Armes and Gerry Turvey both suggest that Sembene's early work bears a similarity to Italian neorealism but not his later works. Armes asserts that Sembene's later work becomes more fluent, inventive, and abrasive, since "the basic chronicling of reality holds little interest for him" (Armes. p. 75). Turvey argues that Sembene's later films are consistent with the Marxist tradition of realism defined by Georg Lukács and Raymond Williams. [9] Julianne Burton refers to Terry Lovell's concept of realism as offering social rather than individual pleasure, which Burton applies to Third World cinema, in general, and to Sembene's films, in particular, as providing an alternative to psychoanalytic or Brechtian, puritanical "displeasure." [10] In this sense, various realist aesthetics have been applied to Sembene's films. The varieties of "realism" invoked raise questions about which conception/s of realism is/are most appropriate and useful. Clearly Marxist or socialist realism is more appropriate than an aesthetic analysis based on bourgeois realism or naturalism. (In terms of film practice, if neorealist film practice offers relevant similarities to Sembene's films, it is Visconti's materialist form of realism rather than DeSica's psychological or Rossellini's theological approaches to realism that offers a useful analogy.)

Sembene's aesthetic is obviously closer to Eisenstein's dialectical reshaping and reconstruction of social reality than it is to classical Hollywood's sutured illusion of an individual's psychological reality. Sembene Ousmane received formal training as a filmmaker in the Soviet Union. While his films reflect this experience, they also reflect a genuinely African and Third World appropriation of Marxist realist aesthetics. From a Western theoretical standpoint, Raymond Williams's, Georg Lukács' and Terry Lovell's notions of Marxist realism are certainly much more useful for analyzing Sembene's realist aesthetics than is André Bazin's personalist and phenomenological approach or Siegfried Kracauer's concept of mimesis.

According to Tony Lovell, the Marxist concept of realist aesthetics has ties to realist epistemology in scientific and historical inquiry. Realism as an epistemology offers an alternative to empiricism or positivism, on the one hand, and conventionalism, on the other. A realist approach to science or history does not restrict itself to observables. Instead, it focuses upon generative mechanisms and the "deep" ontological structures, which function as the causal mechanisms and connections beneath the perceptual surface. The epistemological approach which Lovell calls conventionalism asserts,

"...the world is in effect constructed in and by theory...But if our only access to it [the world] is via a succession of theories that describe it in mutually exclusive terms, then the concept of an independent reality ceases to have any force or function." (Lovell, p. 15)

Unlike conventionalism, realism asserts that the existence of a "real" world which

exists outside of our cognition of it and ability to linguistically label it. A Marxist aesthetics of realism advocates using art as an alternative to scientific inquiry as a source of knowledge. Realist art increases our understanding of the structures functioning behind appearances. Modernist art often embodies a more conventionalist epistemology — in which an art work which focuses primarily on exposing its own mechanisms may remain trapped in an endlessly circular and relativist series of boxes, self-contained and entirely self-referential.

In contrast, Marxist realist art draws parallels, analogies, and fairly direct connections between historical or contemporary social, political, and economic "reality" and the artistic text. Cinema influenced by Marxist realist aesthetics is unlike bourgeois realist cinema in general and classical Hollywood cinema in particular, which are closer to an aesthetic embodiment of empiricism than realist epistemology. Unlike Hollywood, Sembene often eschews perceptual and psychological impressions or illusions of reality in favor of uncovering social, economic, and political forces — the causal mechanisms beneath the "felt" surface.

Reference is at the heart of realist art. References to social reality and to the forces that have historically produced social and economic oppression usually promote the idea that social reality can and must be changed. Marxist realist art is often overtly didactic, often advocating changes in existing social reality through revolt or revolution.

In her analysis of feminist film theory Christine Gledhill comes to the conclusion that it is difficult to conceive of a feminist film practice that advocates social change and does not at the same time posit realism.^[11] Similarly, it is difficult to approach Sembene's films and conceive of a Marxist/feminist film practice (advocating revolt against both neo-colonial and Islamic oppression) that fails to posit realism. Realism in Sembene's films takes the form of explicating the social and economic forces that link the films' narrative events. The films suggest revolutionary (simultaneously traditionalist and progressive) alternatives to racial and sexual oppression.

Sembene's realist aesthetic links the forces behind colonial and neo-colonial oppression to those behind sexual oppression and advocates the elimination of both. These films depict socialist and feminist strategies and goals as so deeply intertwined that the two tendencies cannot be separated without limiting or diminishing the advancement and importance of both. This idea has profound implications regarding the often-separate pursuit of feminist or socialist objectives in the West and East.

Sembene's films shape and reconstruct social reality, which is not depicted as entirely typical, average, accidental, empirically verifiable, or divinely inspired. *EMITAI* and *CEDDO* are both based upon historical research and Sembene's careful attention to detail. Nevertheless, the films do not reduce history to a series of empirically verifiable facts, nor present it as a series of arbitrary, purely relative conventions. Sembene's history is selectively Marxist, it is also epistemologically "realist" in tracing the causal links between and structures of various kinds of oppression in Africa.

Narrative causality in *EMITAI*, *XALA*, and *CEDDO* is usually social and economic, as opposed to psychological (e.g. the individual characters' desires that motivate

Hollywood cinema). However, Sembene does not completely refuse supernatural causality in depicting social reality in *EMITAI* and *XALA*. Supernatural beliefs and experiences indigenous to West Africa receive more positive treatment in Sembene's films than do foreign-imposed religions, but only in the somewhat ironic sense of the words uttered by *XALA*'s El Hadji that these are "true" fetishes.

Although Sembene is clearly an atheist himself, his films consistently assert the integrity of native customs and traditions in the face of foreign oppression. African religions may not do any good but they certainly do not do the unjustifiable harm wrought by foreign impostors. Sembene's portrayal of Diola gods in *EMITAI* suggests that they serve a function enunciated by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of The Earth*. The Diolas fear their gods more than their colonial oppressors. The only means of reducing the oppressed's terror is for them to believe in phantoms that are even more terrifying. Social and historical reality, as depicted in Sembene's films, contains religious beliefs that the films both reinforce and undermine. This reality is not reducible to empirically verifiable "facts,"

FEMALE TYPE AND ALLEGORY IN SEMBENE'S FILMS (Kindem)

Social reality in Sembene's films is a matrix of complex forces that impinges upon groups of characters, not just individuals. Characters and events in these films are not only completely individuated but also socially typed. As Carrie O. Moore points out,

"Sembene's films have never been about individuals...A single character becomes a type representing a specific collectivity. His success in building his films around a collectivity while still respecting variations in individual personalities reflects his idea of the masses." (Moore, p. 154)

Both male and female characters are easily identifiable in terms of social types. As William Van Wert discussed the use of type,

"Type is by definition ideological, for it capitalizes on stereotypes which conform to social and cultural codes...Ideologically speaking, type allows the spectator to easily identify the characters at the same time that it prevents him from identifying with those characters." (Van Wert, p. 212)

However, Van Wert's conception of type is more conventionalist than realist, Sembene's types, on the contrary, each represents a collectivity, a deep structure and a generative force within Senegalese society rather than an arbitrary convention or code. Sembene creates different types on different levels. Colonialist and neo-colonialist villains can represent different stages or forms of oppression, and in some cases, such as El Hadji in *XALA*, these characters sometimes go through a ritualistic social and ideological transformation. As Françoise Pfaff points out, Sembene's women characters, such as the women in *XALA*, sometimes represent different stages of African development or different responses to oppression. One aspect of Sembene's approach to type that prevents any essentializing of women from occurring is that women characters often represent several "types" simultaneously. As indicated below, Princess Dior in *CEDDO* represents several different social types as she transforms herself from a champion

of privilege to a champion of matrilineage, collectivity, and the Ceddo. As suggested previously by Carrie D. Moore, aspects of individual personality are interwoven with social and collective types to produce a rich and varied portrait of Senegalese women.

Like typage, Sembene uses allegory in basically a representational and referential way, designed to elicit feelings of collective social pleasure. Sembene's narratives contain aspects of both epic (Brechtian) drama and allegory. Marcia Landy, in discussing XALA, states, "The nonrepresentational style of allegory can serve as a means of distancing its audience for critical purposes." [12] Typage and allegory offer important means for distancing the audience from individual characters and the surface naturalism of the story, leading instead to intellectual contemplation.

Allegory in Sembene's films is a symbolic representation. His stories often parallel and represent historical or contemporary forces, the generative forces of Senegalese history, the deep structures that have operated as casual mechanisms in the past and continue to do so today. Historical episodes in the films are allegorical in the sense that they parallel and represent contemporary problems in Senegal. These connections are allegorical but not purely conventional because they are based on deep structures that have caused ongoing social problems. In these films, allegory, irony, and satire stimulate collective social pleasure, and are based especially on the values shared among the oppressed and dispossessed in Senegal. Such shared values and perceptions are a source of identification and solidarity within this social sector, which makes Sembene's realist cinema popular, pleasurable, and instructive. At the same time, such narrative tactics and consequent popular reception make his films a source of anger, consternation, and suppression among the neocolonialist bourgeoisie and other social/ political elites.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate the potential impact in Senegal of Sembene's films and his realist approach to typage and allegory are to consider the film CEDDO. A major conflict in CEDDO exists between the patriarchal/ patrilineal line of succession advocated by pm-Islamic forces and the matriarchal/ matrilineal line of succession advocated by the Ceddo. The Ceddo are slave-warriors who hold fast to ethnic traditions in the face of foreign oppression. Princess Dior is kidnapped by the Ceddo in an attempt to force the ethnic chief, her father, to give up his campaign to convert the Ceddo to Islam. The conversion is inspired by the imam, who eventually has the ethnic chief assassinated so that he can succeed the chief, and then wage a holy war against the Cockle. Princess Dior, after hearing news of her father's death, returns to the village and kills the imam, preventing him from marrying her, establishing a patrilineal line of succession, or converting the Ceddo to Islam.

Allegorically the traditional Islamic forces in CEDDO represent contemporary Islamic brotherhoods, which dominate Senegalese politics. The Ceddo stand for the urban and rural workers who maintain ethnic traditions in Senegalese Society. The imam is like an Islamic politician, who aspires to rule Senegal and implicitly establish an Islamic state. The Princess represents all the traditional values of matrilineal succession and the important place occupied by women in traditional West African Society. When the Princess kills the imam by castrating him with a bullet, she symbolically supplants the contemporary political dominance of Islamic brotherhoods with a female leader. CEDDO is a call to revolutionary action.

Africans must consider the example of the Princess so that they can dispense with the vestiges of colonialism in Senegal today. Given the current political situation in Senegal, CEDDO is truly radical and revolutionary.

CEDDO's narrative demonstrates that gender-specific, political, and religious oppression are clearly intertwined. Although Princess Dior is the central female character in the film, the depiction of other women, such as the slave women and the Ceddo woman who is given a new Islamic name, also reinforce the theme of oppression. Princess Dior herself represents several different types of women at different points in the film. Few different types of women represented at various point by Princess Dior are listed below. They reflect social forces that are and have been at work in Senegalese society and different stages of African development. They recur in many of Sembene's films.

Female Character Types:

1. Traditional mother figure:

This figure is subservient and loyal to her husband and dependent upon him for financial support. She is often uneducated. She cares for the children, maintains traditional customs and values, and is a dependable source of stability and emotional support within the family. She is practical and down to earth and is resigned to her condition. She illustrates the strength and endurance of African women. Examples of this type (listed in chronological order of film release):

- Fathma in BAROM SARREIT
- Diouana's mother in BLACK GIRL
- Ibrahaim's first wife in MANDABI
- Tauw's mother in TAUW
- the women who form a collective group in EMITAI
- Awa in XALA
- Dior's dream to honor her militant captor in CEDDO

2. Symbols of fertility:

These symbols represent the fecundity of pregnant women and mothers. They represent the hope for future generations in Africa; their fertility is sometimes related to the future promise of a better and more equitable use of Africa's natural as well as human resources. Examples of this type:

- a pregnant woman who is taken to the maternity clinic in BAROM SARRETF (camera pans from her to flowers in garden)
- Nafi, Tauw's pregnant girl friend in TAUW
- the women in a group surround the boy with a gun and who refuse to hand rice over to French in EMITAI
- Dior as a fertility goddess and the women and children whose names are changed by the imam in CEDDO

3. Young victims of exploitation and oppression:

These wasted sources of Africa's future are often sold into virtual or actual slavery or deluded with false dreams and the false hope of material possessions. As

characters, they are often treated as possessions and trophies. They represent women as commodities, male fetishes, and objects of desire. Ultimately they are seen as victims of colonial Miller male oppression. Examples of this type:

- Fathma in *BAROM SARRET*: There is an implication that Fathma will resort to prostitution to feed her family.
- Diorama in *BLACK GIRL*: She is traded on the "slave market" to become a house servant, and she consequently becomes an object or trophy belonging to a white family before committing suicide in France.
- Girlfriend in *TAUW* of Tauw's male friend. He says he will not give up the girl upon whom he has spent so much money until he gets something in return; Tauw, himself at first refuses to accept responsibility for Nafi's pregnancy.
- N'Gone in *XALA*: Her marriage to El Hadji cannot be consummated because he is impotent; she has been "traded" to a wealthy old man for cars and other dowry gifts.
- Oumi in *XALA*: She grants sexual favors to El Hadji for financial support to maintain her Western fetishes (Oumi is positioned somewhere between Awa and l'Gone)
- Dior in *CEDDO*: She is treated as a possession by various suitors; female slave in that film.

4. Militants standing up against colonial and/or male oppression:

The characters represent the fact that African liberation is tied to women's liberation and women have key roles to play in Africa's future development. Examples:

- the women who represent a collective force against oppression in *EMJTAI*
- Rama, who represents the fight for equality and pan African Solidarity in *XALA*. (The name Rama may refer to a Hindu incarnation of Vishnu, although as Salma Murad Smith suggested in a class on African and Caribbean Literature and Film at N.C. State University, no Hindu or Muslim in India would have the audacity to adopt such a name from Sanskrit, meaning dark colored, black.)
- Princess Dim, who castrates and kills the imam with the help of and in solidarity with the Ceddo, symbolically removing class and caste barriers and the source of Patriarchal Islamic oppression in *CEDDO* and reasserting matrilineal and matriarchal aspects of traditional West African Society.

Sembene uses typage complexly to represent many different but equally important roles played by women in traditional and contemporary West African Society. In particular, *EMITAL* and *CEDDO* favorably depict solidarity between men and women and joint action to revolt against oppression. In *EMITAL* the men refuse to transport the rice for the French after they hear the village women's defiant chants. In *CEDDO* the Ceddo men help Dior kill the imam. Because she is a woman Dior is able to grab a gun and walk directly up to the imam. As Françoise Pfaff has suggested, such an action would have been much more difficult for the Ceddo men to undertake. The men put themselves between the imam's guns and Dior. In both films, the women initiate revolt and the men share their action. These film narratives point the way towards a society that discriminates neither on the basis of race, class, nor sex at the same time that it celebrates the collective unity of social revolution.

The complexity of Sembene's typage and allegory promotes spectator distance for purposes of meditation at the same time that it encourages identification with groups of characters as a form of social pleasure. Similarly camera framing, point of view shots, and subjective narration in *EMITAI* also promote distance from individual characters and identification with a group or collective, such as the Diola women in *EMITAI* and the Ceddo and Ceddo-converted Princess Dior in *CEDDO*.

REALIST ENUNCIATION IN *EMITAI* (Steele)

In this section I shall argue for a Marxist realist practice that challenges the status quo. I shall cite examples of realist enunciation that retain the allegedly (ideologically) complicit notions of recognition and identification from psychoanalysis and yet can accommodate a collective constituting subject. I shall demonstrate that the point-of-view shot, the quintessential bourgeois realist device may, in fact, serve a Marxist realist function of cementing and affirming group solidarity, class consciousness, and collectivity. In Sembene's film *EMITAI*, textual strategies reinforce such a Marxist realist aesthetic. The shared point of view shot becomes the textual emblem of realism and of a collective utopia.

Before turning to an analysis of the narrative and cinematic style of *EMITAI*, I wish to explain why I feel that it is important for me to restrict the hypothetical effects of textual identification to Western viewers. As a Western viewer and critic, I am largely ignorant of the specifics of ethnic culture presented in the film and of a Senegalese audience's expectations. I therefore must base my analysis on internal evidence, which may be inaccurate or incomplete.

Second, it would be condescending to assume to assume that the same psychic regression which causes identification in a Western viewer occurs in a Third World viewer. The notion of a kind of identification encouraged by textual mechanisms is specifically tailored to an audience socialized according to the Freudian model. Third, and related to the previous point, a premise of this paper is that Western realism strategically contains Marx within the boundaries of Freud. (This is exemplified by the use of point of view in classical cinema.) Yet, according to Fredric Jameson, realism does not necessarily reduce the political to the personal in the Third World context, where "the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public Third World culture and society." [13] This type of reception may, in fact, only be true among Third World viewers who hold a less individually based notion of being in the world.

Most Western viewers, I believe, are culturally conditioned to identify with an individual in the same way that many Third World viewers identify with a group. Most Western viewers are innured to the strategies of containment inherent in bourgeois realism. As a result they may read even the Third World allegory backward, perceiving the political merely as a "metaphoric decoration" of the private (Jameson, p.79). So my study of textual mechanisms may be valid only among Western audiences for whom identification with a group, collective, or class is an alien concept, but one that can be encouraged textually by using conventions similar to but different from those of bourgeois realism. Transcultural discourse using these conventions reveals to the West the repressed reality of collectivity which Third World film overtly celebrates.

EMITAI's narrative encourages emotional identification for collective action. At the diegetic level, EMITAI deals with a Senegalese ethnic group pushed to resistance by French occupying forces during World War II. But the film is also an allegory about ethnic unity, about collectivity and the threat that capitalism and neo-colonialism pose to it. These two malevolent forces are represented in the film by the use of language. The male characters have the use of language and are tainted by the individualism it affords. Language serves not to unify but rather to divide them, impeding their ability to take action and also retarding the narrative. The women in the film are the catalysts of the narrative. Unencumbered by language and (from a Western perspective) individuated subjectivity, they can rise up and take collective action against the French. At the representational level, the men are contemporary Africa, shackled by bourgeois humanism, which is neo-colonialism's legacy, whereas the women symbolize a past and future utopia as well as a means to throw off the yoke of oppression to arrive at that utopian state.

The textual mechanisms of point of view painstakingly position us as viewers to identify with the women and to distance us from the individuated men, so that we are not tempted to read the political merely as a metaphoric decoration of the private. In EMITAI the point-of-view shot is emasculated, stripped of the individual privilege that it is accorded in classical film, and thus it is rendered a realist device. The traditionally male gaze is distributed among the women, affording a collective subjectivity. Several variations on the classical Western use of the point of view shot accomplish this.

One such shot is attributed to more than one person so that we are distanced from an individual narrator and encouraged to identify with the group of women. In this scene, two women walk through the brush searching for a particular male character. We see a subjective shot of the bushes, yet it is ambiguous which woman's vision is represented. The subsequent shot ascribes it to both women and seems to suggest that their vision is interchangeable. Individuated subjectivity is unimportant, or the camera style diffuses it so that we identify with a group or class.

This kind of usage stands in contradiction to Edward Branigan's assertion that in classical film, a point-of-view shot attributed to two people is less subjective than a POV shot attributed to one person.^[14] This is perhaps only true within the model of subject formation born out of and perpetuated by Western culture, which grants ontological status to the individual as a means of suppressing the notion of class. Identification with a group, collective, or class is more clearly, indeed almost self-consciously encouraged, in a free-standing point of view shot, that is, one not bracketed by glance shots. Such a free-standing POV shot occurs when the women in the film return to the village with the male character, and we receive a clearly subjective shot of the bow of the canoe cutting through the water. The omission of bracketing shots conceals the identity of the narrator, since such a shot would reveal which woman occupied the position at the bow, therefore whose vision was represented. This also might have bestowed individuated subjectivity on one of the women as leader, giving her narratively significant traits. But the shot instead reaffirms the collective subjectivity.

This clearly established collective subjectivity is threatened in a nearly classical use of the POV shot, which seems to reduce the political to the personal. This almost

occurs when a woman in the collective glances upward and we share her view of the sun through the trees. This shot, however, does not reveal narratively significant traits about the women so much as describe how the collective of women is feeling at that moment. The woman serves as a proxy for the group; her look represents the collective. Sembene's refusal to return to a glance shot and his substituting instead shots of several women affirm that all the women are hot and tired, not just this one. This nearly classical shot, like the previous one, frustrates our expectations that we will identify with a single character. We are made increasingly aware that we are positioned as a member of a collective.

In *EMITAI* the mechanisms of identification do not subliminally and strategically contain the political but rather self-consciously interpellate the Western viewer as a member of a class. Textual identification here serves a progressive end: it discourages Freudian individual pleasures while encouraging nearly Brechtian social pleasures. Terry Lovell describes this political notion of social pleasures:

"The pleasures of a text may be grounded in pleasures of an essentially public and social kind. For instance, pleasures of common experience identified and celebrated in art, and throughout this celebration; given recognition and validation; pleasures of solidarity to which this sharing may give rise; pleasure in shared and socially defined aspirations and hopes: in a sense of identity and community." (Lovell, p.95)

Anti-realists from psychoanalytic and conventionalist epistemological perspectives have called for an avant-garde practice that discourages the pleasure of identification. Yet this film demonstrates that neither pleasure nor identification nor point of view are inherently the enemies of women or of any oppressed class. A collective POV is not necessarily an integral part of bourgeois ideology and may, in fact, be used to strike a blow against the status quo.

The narrative and textual strategies of *EMITAI* echo CLR James' observation: "[African] women have got a capacity which men have got to learn." [15] Women are accorded a subject position, and masculine spectators are often addressed in the feminine. Males are absorbed into the narrative and encouraged to identify with a collective heroine. They are dissuaded from identifying with benign and indecisive males. Viewers of *EMITAI* are offered a collective and non-gendered subject position for political ends.

EMITAI, like many Third World films seeks to arouse consciousness. Yet Sembene does not work exclusively within the Brechtian tradition of distancing and subordinating pleasure to thought. He does not completely discourage identification. Sembene posits an alternative. He encourages not Freudian individual pleasures but social pleasures inscribed in the text. As Terry Lovell notes, a concept of social pleasures is vital to Third World films, as it may be put to the use of politics. Indeed, she warns that "a political aesthetics...ignores this dimension at its peril" (Lovell, p. 95).

Julianne Burton points out that a realist approach to Third World film does not necessarily imply a complete rejection of psychoanalysis, but rather an expansion and modification of it:

"What is needed is not the [continued] exclusion of psychoanalytic

considerations from the critical discourse regarding Third World film, but the expansion or modification of those considerations to accommodate a Westernized, individually-based notion of being-in-the-world ...To question the applicability of Western mythic paradigms in Third World cultural contexts is justifiable; to deny a mythic dimension in Third World cultural products is incomprehensible." (Burton, p.16)

CEDDO, as Julianne Burton notes, encourages social pleasures to foster unity (Burton, p.18). The idea of encouraging social pleasures to foster unity and throw off the yoke of colonialism is as applicable to the colonized, oppressed, and exploited in the First and Second Worlds, as it is to the colonized of the Third World. Sarah Maldoror has said,

"I'm no adherent of the concept of the 'Third World.' I make films so that people — no matter what race or color they are — can understand them. For me there are only exploiters and the exploited, that's all. To make a film means to take a position, and when I take a position, I am educating people... Personally, I feel that Sembene Ousmane is the most talented of our directors... Today we are like small sardines surrounded by sharks. But, the sardines will grow up. They'll learn how to resist the sharks..."[16]

The films of Sembene Ousmane teach us many things, not the least of which is the crucial role that women have and must continue to play in Africa's development and in the development of colonized, exploited, oppressed peoples throughout the world. If we approach Sembene's films on their own terms yet try to apply what they have to say to the West, we cannot help but realize that socialism and feminism are inextricably bound together in a universal struggle against exploitation.

NOTES

1. Ousmane Sembene, letter to Françoise Pfaff in Pfaff's *The Cinema of Ousmane Sembene* (Weatport CN: Greenwood press, 1984). Also referred to as follows in Ulrich Gregor's interview with Sembene, *Framework* 7/8 (Spring, 1978), p. 36:

"There can be no development in Africa if women are left out of the account. In a modern Africa, women can take part in production, education, but they are still refused the right of speech."

2. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1979).

3. See Robert Stam, "College Course File: Third World Cinema" *Journal of Film and Video* 36.4 (Fall 1984), 50-61

4. Pfaff, p.160. See also Thomas Napolis Hammond, "The Image of Women in Senegalese Fiction," PhD. dissertation. 1976. State University of New York at Buffalo.

5. David Lamb, *The Africans* (New York: Random House, 1984).

6. Ousmane Sembene, Interview with Noel Ebony, quoted in Guy Hennebelle, *Cinéastes d'Afrique Noire*, p. 115, quoted by Roy Armes, "Ousmane Sembene:

Questions of Change," *Cine-Tracts* 4.2/3 (nos.14/15, 1981), 71-77. Industry figures cited by Armes from Paulin Soumanou Vieyra, *Le Cinéma Africain des Origines à 1973* (Paris: Editions Présence Africain en 1972).

7. Carrie Dailey Moore, *Evolution of an African Artist: Social Realism in the Works of Sembene Ousmane* (PhD. dissertation, Indiana University, 1973).

10. William F. Van Wert, "Ideology in the Third World Cinema: A Study of Sembene Ousmane and Glauber Rocha," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* (Spring 1979), pp. 207-226.

9. Gerry Turvey, "XALA and the Curse of New Colonialism," *Screen* 26.3-4 (May-August, 1995), 75-87. See also, Georg Lukács, *Studies in European Realism* (London: Merlin, 1978) and Raymond Williams, "A Lecture on Realism" *Screen* 18.1 (Spring 1977), 60-64.

10. See Terry Lovell. *Pictures of Reality: Aesthetics, Politics, and Pleasure* (London: British Film Institute, 1980). Julianne Burton, "Marginal Cinemas and Mainstream Critical Theory," *Screen* 26. 3-4 (May-August 1985), 2-21,

11. Christine Gledhill, "Recent Developments in Feminist Criticism," reprinted in Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen, *Film Theory and Criticism*, 3rd ed, (New York Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 845. Regarding realist epistemology, see also Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: Knopf, 1985), pp. 17-23.

12. Marcia Landy, "Political Allegory and 'Engaged Cinema': Sembene's XALA," *Cinema Journal* 23.3 (Spring 1984), 33.

13. Fredric Jameson, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" *Social Text* 15 (Fall, 1986), 65-88.

14. Edward Branigan, *Point of View in Classical Cinema* (New York: Mouton, 1984), p. 116.

15. CLR James, "Toward the Seventh: The Pan-African Congress — Past, Present, and Future," *At the Rendezvous of Victory* (London: Allison and Busby, 1984). p. 250, Quoted in Turvey, p. 82.

16. Sarah Maldoror, "On *Sambizanga*," *Women and the Cinema: a Critical Anthology*, Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary, eds. (New York: H. P. Dutton, 1977), pp. 308-310.

Come Back Africa and South African film history

by Ntongela Masilela

from *Jump Cut*, no. 36, May 1991, pp. 61-65

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"The initial wonder that characterized descriptions of pictures that moved on a screen was very soon replaced in South Africa by a comparative negligence on the part of the Press...Interest in films as historic documentary material was, with most unfortunate results, very slight in South Africa. As early as 1919...owing to their low wage level, the provision of special cinemas for non-Europeans could not be contemplated for many years." — Thelma Gutsche, *The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa: 1895-1940*.

In South Africa economics is directly determinant. The evolution, structure and ideological complications of South African cinema begin in the context of the history and social contradictions that developed as a result of the mining revolution. This revolution in South African economic history occurred following the discovery of diamonds and gold in the 1860s and 1880s in Kimberly and Johannesburg respectively. The effect of this discovery was the industrialization of the country through the mining industry, and it had consequences nationally and internationally. Internationally, it facilitated British national capital's deeper penetration into the country, where British exploitative ventures continue today protected by conservative ideology.

Nationally, the effects of this historical event were even more profound. It made possible the accumulation of capital from the surplus extracted from labor, particularly black labor. It transformed the demographic composition of the country qualitatively and quantitatively, shifting the population from rural areas to the cities. In other words, the economic revolution impelled by mining created the context in which British imperialism, supported by other European imperialisms, cemented its stranglehold on the many strands of cultural formation which were then emerging. It altered the country's cultural coordinates in immeasurable ways. Specifically in relation to film, music halls changed into cinema halls, thus making way for the penetration of a new film culture.

The first serious theoretical formulations of the ideology and philosophy of apartheid, which has had horrendous consequences on South African film culture, found expression in mining publications.[1][[open notes in new window](#)] Apartheid

ideology completely shaped the structure of South African films. From the moment of its emergence, South African cinema has been obsessed with the ideology of apartheid — not in opposition to it but rather attempting to imprint it on the historical imagination and consciousness of black people (Africans, Indians and so-called Coloureds). In contrast, South African cinema in exile has contested such an imposition of cultural hegemony.

Although films were shown on a permanent basis in the country from about 1909 on, the first film was shown in Johannesburg, Monday, May 11, 1896.[2] The cultural formation of the audiences for early films had been prepared for indirectly by the mining industry. The cinema audience in mining compounds consisted of two large groups: a black peasantry in the process of being proletarianized into mineworkers, and white agricultural workers in the process of being transformed into an industrial proletariat. Miners had previously been entertained through the musical hall art forms. Film now destroyed the previous art forms and colonized that cultural space. Many immigrants also constituted a large portion of the audience, especially Jews from Eastern Europe fleeing constant pogroms who had come to South Africa seeking fortunes in the mining industry. In the major towns, the emerging white middle class patronized film; some of their wealth came from the developing manufacturing industries, industries which were given impetus by the diversification of expanding mining capital. In other words, it was the mining industry which gave impetus to the development of film culture in South Africa.

The mining revolution also led to the outbreak of a modern imperialist war in Africa. It was modern in the sense that it was not over land and territory but rather over who controlled the State and industrialization processes. The Boer War of 1899-1901 between British imperial interests and Boer (Afrikaans) national interests provides the historical context in which perhaps for the first time South African propaganda films were made. Major British film companies (British Mutoscope and Biograph Co., R.W. Paul, and the Warwick Trading Company) and various other companies (Pathé, Gaumont, Gibbons, Edison and others) were at the center of this propaganda warfare. As Elizabeth Grottle Strebel, social historian of films, writes, the British film companies were merely interested in perpetuating "the myths and symbols of British imperialist iconography." [3] Two kinds of films were made during this imperialist war: raw documentary films and staged propaganda films. As Strebel continues, these anti-Boer propaganda films had the same preoccupations as those present at the birth of cinema: the realism of Lumière and the magic of Méliès. [4]

The early, marked influence of propaganda filmmaking has had profound consequences for the development and history of film culture in South Africa. First, this is a particular form of the imperialist transplanting of film culture. That is, if we look at film as the battleground of iconographic representations and interests, we will see that until recently film production in South Africa was never considered an artistic creative act but rather as a propaganda instrument against what one perceived as one's enemies. If in 1900, imperialist British film iconography depicted Afrikaner people and culture as the very essence of "barbarism," from 1910 (the date of the political formation of present day South Africa), the very same Afrikaner people, now to defend white state interests, have developed a complex film iconography at whose center Blacks (Africans, Indians and so-called Coloured) are depicted as demons. In other words, South African film iconography has a

history constructed on lies and falsehood, not on authentic representations. Hegemonic film culture in South Africa is currently controlled by the Broederbond, an elite cultural organization whose intent is to perpetuate the hegemonic control of Afrikaans culture and the dominance of white nationalism.

Not surprisingly, the "national culture" is one of mediocrity. No film of outstanding quality has emerged from imposing the ideology of white supremacy on cinema. Interestingly and paradoxically, the two most important film features made in the history of South African cinema, were made by two U.S. film directors. (They will be referred to in a moment, for they represent the two opposed extremes apparent in South African film history. They both indicate clearly that the history of our film culture is Janus-faced.)

The second major factor in South African film history is the penetration of U.S. and British film companies from the very beginnings of a national film-viewing culture. The transformations in our film culture mentioned earlier were effected by many of these foreign companies. Between the closing phase of the Boer War in 1901 and the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, mostly by British companies made many short films, especially documentaries. South Africa was still in many ways a British colony, though the provinces of Transvaal and Orange Free State had already become independent republics in the second half of the nineteenth century. At this moment, the British film company, Warwick Trading Company, dominated our film screen through production, distribution and exhibition. The first feature film in South Africa, THE GREAT KIMBERLEY DIAMOND ROBBERY, was made in 1910 by the Springbok Production Company.[5] The film's title indicates the importance of the mining revolution to the then developing historical imagination in our film culture.

In fact, historical imagination characterized the film which begins South African cinema: DE VOORTREKKERS/ WINNING A CONTINENT. This 1916 film was produced by a South-African-owned company, African Film Productions Limited, under the directorship of I.W. Schlesinger.[6] The formation of this film company and the making of this film were shaped by the historical conditions of the First World War. During the war period, because of blockages and shortages, Hollywood's dominance in supplying films to the world market was seriously affected. In Russia the war created the material and cultural conditions which facilitated the emergence of the cinema of Dziga Vertov, Pudovkin, Kuleshov and others, however much they drew their inspiration from the work of Griffith.

At a lower level of intellectual inspiration and cultural richness, the war ended the dominance of foreign film companies in South Africa. The market for films was expanding while the supply of films was contracting. This was the historical logic in founding companies like African Film Productions Limited and making blockbuster films like WINNING A CONTINENT. Unlike in Russia, which developed intellectual capital in the process of building socialism, in South Africa, as capitalism consolidated itself, the capitalist market itself needed an absence of originality in our historical imagination.

This poverty of historical imagination is in full display in WINNING A CONTINENT, which defines our (both black and white South Africans) cultural origins in cinema. The film reveals the shortage of intellectual capital then which continues to the present. The making of DE VOORTREKKERS/ WINNING A

CONTINENT necessitated importing a U.S. film director, Harold Shaw, who earlier had worked for Edison. The film itself has been a subject of many essays.[7] The racist iconography blighting this film was modeled on Griffith's BIRTH OF A NATION. Whereas for the Russians what was fascinating about Griffith was his invention of a new film grammar and syntax, our white compatriots were most fascinated with his racist iconography. This iconography would poison the whole film culture in South Africa for approximately four decades (until another U.S. independent film director was to overturn the terms of its dominance). DE VOORTREKKERS articulates the complex structure of South African history in Manichean terms, a Manicheanism so characteristic of the philosophy and ideology of apartheid. It assumes an unending struggle between the forces of civilization (read, white South Africans) and the demons of barbarism (read, black South Africa). DE VOORTREKKERS reveals the fragmentation and distortion of South African history, even much more than it reveals British imperialist ideology or Afrikaanderdom.

This fragmentation of South African history corresponds to the fragmentation of our social reality, in class and racial terms. The ideology of apartheid dictated that there should be separate and distinct cinemas for the "different" public spheres in South Africa. In this way we have a cinema which can best be designated as apartheid black cinema. It was founded in 1920 on the suggestion of a U.S. pastor, Ray Phillips of the American Board of Missions.[8] Black apartheid cinema was originally directed at the African public sphere in the mining compounds; it had the intent of "sublimating criminal tendencies." The Chamber of Mines and the Municipal Native Affairs Department took an interest in developing this kind of cinema. With time the apartheid government was to fund it extensively through various ministerial departments.

Apartheid black cinema is made by white South Africans (directors, cameramen, editors, etc.) on the basis of the dominant ideology of apartheid and fed to the black public sphere. With the passage of time, it has extended its diabolical tentacles from mining compounds to black urban areas and Bantustans (Homelands). While the production side has been absolutely controlled by whites, who reap enormous profits, the performers are usually Africans. Recently, Africans have also entered the production side. These films are usually made in the Zulu language. The specific aim of apartheid black cinema is to corrupt and demobilize the historical and political imagination of black people. Such a cinema reveals another way in which the ideology of apartheid has spelled mediocrity and disaster for South African cinema.[9]

Parallel with this making of apartheid black cinema was the making of Afrikaans-language cinema. On the whole, the structure of films in this tradition, as Keyan Tomaselli has convincingly argued, depends on a dialectic of insider versus outsider.[10] According to Tomaselli, the fact that the gold mining industry was dominated by British imperial interests against Afrikaaner national interests, the theme of xenophobia pervades this cinema. With time, xenophobia became projected against blacks. Originating in the economic sphere (white versus white), this xenophobia moved to the political plane (white against black), where it remains. In its essentials, xenophobia was part of the ideological shield of Afrikaanderdom (white nationalism).

In contrast, thirty years ago a film was shot secretly in South Africa which, with the passage of time, has prefigured what an authentic national cinema in our country could possibly be. COME BACK AFRICA, by the independent U.S. film director, Lionel Rogosin, is undoubtedly the highest achievement of film culture in South Africa. The film was banned in 1959. It was indeed a momentous occasion on May 1, 1988, when Rogosin's film made its first public appearance in our troubled country.[11]

Lionel Rogosin's first film, ON THE BOWERY (1955) depicted New York City's skid row. It made possible the emergence of the New American Cinema of Jonas Mekas, John Cassavettes, Fredrick Wiseman, and the consolidation of the British Free Cinema of John Schlesinger, Lindsay Anderson and Karel Reisz. One has only to consult Basil Wright's superlative praise of Rogosin's first film at its premiere, even comparing it to Dovzhenko and Dostoevsky, to understand what a momentous occasion its appearance was.[12] Its poetic intermixture of documentary and fiction was a culmination of Flaherty's documentary tradition as well the beginnings of a lyrical experimental documentary form that was to find supreme expression in the work of Santiago Alvarez.

One of the things that makes COME BACK AFRICA one of the serious documents of our cultural history is that it is the last intellectual snapshot of a brilliant literary generation before its destruction in the Sharpeville massacre of 1960. In the film we encounter Bloke Modisane, Lewis Nkosi, Can Themba, Miriam Makeba and others. Lewis Nkosi, who wrote the script of COME BACK AFRICA with Lionel Rogosin and Bloke Modisane, and who acted in the film, was always aware of the film's historic importance. In an article immediately following the film's international premiere, Nkosi, one of Africa's foremost literary critics, praised it in the following terms:

"The film is not great by any standard. There are too many technical weaknesses in the development of the story. However, with all these faults, the story emerges as a powerful document of social truth such as no other producer's camera has unfolded in this country."[13]

On the linguistic plane, as much as in its historical projection of reality, the film displays its certainties and certitudes. Linguistically, the film employs three South African languages which are at the center of our historical and cultural experiences. Zulu is spoken by workers in the mining compound. Afrikaans is spoken by policemen arresting Africans. And English is spoken by African intellectuals in a shebeen and also by businessmen. In other words, the film projects the Zulu language as the language of class solidarity, the Afrikaans language as the language of coercion and repression, and the English language as the language of commerce and intellectual exchange. Though in a sense the film's imaginative designations are simple, they nonetheless capture an element of historical truth. For example, iconographically, the film opens with a silhouetted scene of the mining compounds to which the miners are coming. This opening reveals Rogosin's intuitive brilliance, for as the present essay has attempted to indicate, the mining revolution was at the center of the South African historical experience. In other words, the film opens on the question of labour and capital. It is the dialectic between the two which determines the structural working out of the film.

Still on the iconographic plane, COME BACK AFRICA uniquely displays a positive

image of Africans on the screen from beginning to end. It does not offer a romanticization or distortion of black imagery but concretizes Black cultural forms. From the first appearance of Zacharia, the chief protagonist, among a group of workers, to the closing moments of the film, when crying in despair at the death of his wife, he bangs the table, we sense the film is attempting to convey the sense and structure of South African history. The film equally attempts to draw attention to the tension between city and country, the latter supposedly the center of traditionalism and the latter the locale of cosmopolitanism. In the famous shebeen scene, if Zacharia represents the force of traditionalism, then Lewis Nkosi playing himself represents the pole of cosmopolitanism. Can Themba in the film represents anarchism; no doubt, Miriam Makeba represents spirituality. In other words, the film is a rich tableau of representations, of historical and iconographic contrasts. The true significance of COME BACK AFRICA is that since its making thirty years ago, and its first appearance on the public screens today back at home, it poses one fundamental question: What ought to be the nature and structure of an authentic South African national cinema?

One wishes that this film by an independent U.S.-Jewish film director had been made by Lionel Ngakane, the father of South African cinema. A film like COME BACK AFRICA compels us South Africans to pose to ourselves a critical question concerning Lionel Ngakane: Why has he been unable in exile to establish the guideposts of the South African cinema, despite the fact that he is its unacknowledged father. What are the historical blockages which have prevented Ngakane from constructing a solid historical vision in our cinema! We cannot answer this question right now for we do not possess adequate intellectual instruments with which to unravel its intractable complexities. With the passage of time, however, this question will become crucial in our cultural history.

In the meantime, within the past decade, an independent film culture has been flourishing in South Africa. Undoubtedly, still more outstanding things are still to be expected from the post-Ngakane independent filmmakers like, Barry Feinberg, Harriet Gavshon and others. The new film culture's defining center is its unmitigated hostility to the cultural politics of apartheid. With the unbanning of COME BACK AFRICA and its historical rendezvous with that film, this emerging independent film and video movement will find its cultural history mirrored in this older work. Judging by the quality of films and videos shown in Amsterdam in a two-week festival, "Culture in Another South Africa," from December 8 to December 21, 1987, in a few years time an independent film culture in South Africa will command world-wide recognition.

NOTES

1. Belinda Bozzoli, *The Political Nature of a Ruling Class* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981). pp. 111-125.
2. Thelma Gauche, *The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa, 1895-1940* (Capetown: Howard Timmins, 1972), pp. 95,13.
3. Elizabeth Grottle Strebel, "Primitive Propaganda The Boer War Films," *Sight and Sound* 46.1 (Winter 1976-77), 45.
4. Ibid., p. 45.

5. Keyan Tomaselli, "Capitalism and Culture in South African Cinema," *Wide Angle* 8.2 (1986), 43.
6. Thelma Gutsche, p. 312.
7. The article by Keyan Tomaselli referred to above; Hannes van Zyl, "De Voortrekkers: Some Stereotypes and Narrative Conventions," *Critical Arts* 1.1 (March 1980); Elizabeth Grottle Strebel, "The Voortrekkers: A Cinematographic Reflection of Afrikaaner Nationalism," *Film and History* 9.2 (1979).
8. Harriet Gavshon, "Levels of Intervention in Films made for African Audiences in South Africa," *Critical Arts* 2.4 (1983), 14.
9. Keyan G. Tomaselli, Class and Ideology: Reflections in South African Cinema," *Critical Arts* 1.1 (March 1980). Tomaselli's criticism of Thelma Gutsche's book, a text which founded film studies in South Africa and which this essay attempts to honor, is unfounded. We, who follow after her, stand on her shoulders.
10. Ibid, p. 7.
11. In a private letter of April 18, 1988, Lionel Rogosin indicates from London that the film will open today, May 1st, at the University of Witwatersrand and in Johannesburg and also in Cape Town. Michel Lazarus of Osprey Films in Cape Town, in a private letter of March 11th, 1988, alludes to this date mentioned by Rogosin. For over a year Michel Lazarus struggled with the censors to lift the ban on COME BACK AFRICA.
12. Basil Wright, "ON THE BOWERY," *Sight and Sound* 26.2 (Autumn 1956), 98.
13. Lewis Nkosi, "Come Back Africa," *Fighting Talk*, February 1960, no pagination. This source was given, for which I'm thankful, by Professor Jacques Alvarez-Pereyre in Grenoble.

Cry Freedom. Lethal Weapon 2. A Dry White Season Hollywood's apartheid

by Nicholas Wellington

from *Jump Cut*, no. 36, May 1991, pp. 66-72

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After decades of largely ignoring the topic of apartheid, in 1987-1989 Hollywood produced three major features with stories and strong opinions about the South African racist policies: CRY FREEDOM, LETHAL WEAPON 2, and A DRY WHITE SEASON.[1] [[open notes in new window](#)] But South Africa and apartheid present Hollywood with a problem. The nexus of race and class, prosperity and poverty (and gender for that matter) in South Africa is disquietingly similar to that in the United States and many other countries. Thus, a Hollywood representation of apartheid is in a certain way, a representation of Hollywood, of itself, of "the self." A probing investigation of apartheid could turn upon itself — upon its creators and audiences,

Conversely, South Africa and apartheid can no longer be represented only within the conventions of "first world film about third world subject." Political consciousness and critical opinion will not allow a film to depict South Africa only a remote land in a savage continent populated by primitive blacks, big game in the brown veld, devilish Afrikaners speaking a Teutonic tongue, or a bulwark against communism, South Africa cannot simply be represented as "the other."

Of course this paradox is not unique to Hollywood. For decades South Africa provided the world with its best opportunity for unambiguous denunciation (or defense) of a social system. Good versus evil became rendered, literally, as a black and white contest. This stark clarity coincided wondrously with the dualism that dominates western thought. It was also the strength of both the pro- and anti-apartheid forces. But it now proves to be their weakness.

South African politics have never been purely black and white, and they certainly are not now. There have always been multiplicities, contradictions and a spectrum of colors rather than black and white.[2] Or, to use a phrase from Steve Biko's testimony in court and used in CRY FREEDOM, whites have always been pink rather than white, and blacks, brown.

The South African democratic movement has neglected and even discouraged exploring and confronting this spectrum lest it rupture the struggles unity. If someone referred publicly to the "complexity of the situation" in South Africa, it

used to be a virtual guarantee that a relatively sophisticated racist was about to deliver a set piece. At the heart of apartheid is the classification (and oppression of/preference for) of people on the basis of their color, race, ethnicity, gender, class, language, history, sexual preference, age, job skills, education, or political opinion. A strategy of cohesion has been essential to the anti-apartheid movement.

But this unity in opposition has had its price. Because the opposition movement so long avoided acknowledging its spectrum of multiplicity, those contradictions now play themselves out in the political feuding besetting the pro-negotiations coalition of the African National Congress, Cosatu, United Democratic Front, church groups, youth organizations and other groups. It makes them vulnerable to destabilization by the right wing. It has made even more difficult the shift from a movement that has been skillful in formulating strategies of opposition to a nascent government that must generate effective and imaginative alternatives for the New South Africa.

More pertinent to observers in the United States is the media representation of this struggle. Most television, radio and newspaper coverage uses a format that fosters exactly this dualism and simplistic thinking. Thirty-second sound and visual bites do not make for masthead analysis. Easy but heavily burdened categories like race and tribe are inevitably summoned into service. Personalities replace people: De Klerk = all whites; Tutu and Mandela = all blacks. All is explained within a dualism of tyrants and victims/ heroes. The black and white of apartheid scorns an inadvertent victory.

One consequence is that South Africans' struggle becomes divorced from the struggles that surround the audience. The media depict the struggle in South Africa in such brutally simple terms that it makes it seem fundamentally different. We know from experience the doubts and difficulties of other struggles where such a spectrum is undeniable. In these circumstances, the comparison to U.S. problems with South Africa becomes hollow rhetoric. While Nelson Mandela was cheered by the U.S. Congress and by black school kids in Oakland, their cause has little in common beyond opposition to apartheid.

Media's transparent inadequacy to explain South Africa's contradictions and spectrum makes for confusion and disillusion — it seems that what happens in South Africa is so impossibly irrational and willful that it is best left alone. Those who were demons now seem reasonable while the heroes turn out to have feet of clay. It would be better to pause to consider why they were made into heroes or demons in the first place. However, there is no social space to reflect upon why South Africa's spectrum was always represented in black and white. The nature and purpose of such representation is seldom questioned.

Within this framework, I wish to explore the representation of South Africa and apartheid in three recent Hollywood productions. As I argue, apartheid presents Hollywood with a problem. The more that films show apartheid in terms of a dualism of good versus evil, hero versus devil, self versus other, the more obvious it will become that this dualism derives from a construction of Hollywood and its social-intellectual rubric. Conversely, the more that the representation explores nuance and contradiction — the spectrum — the further it diverges from Hollywood cinematic convention.

This point can be illustrated by a difference between, on the one hand, LETHAL

WEAPON 2, and on the other, A DRY WHITE SEASON and CRY FREEDOM. LETHAL WEAPON 2 takes an element of apartheid and integrates it into Hollywood cinematic practice. FREEDOM and A DRY WHITE SEASON take this cinematic practice and attempt to use it to tell "politically correct" stories about apartheid. Because of this fundamental difference, I will consider LETHAL WEAPON 2 separately from the other two films.

LETHAL WEAPON 2

LETHAL WEAPON 2 was one of 1989's summer blockbusters. It is about a world that contains only decent people and evil people. The baddies are South African diplomatic officials who smuggle drugs and Krugerands in exchange for dollars. They replace communists (out of vogue anyway). Nazis (yawn), corrupt CIA officials (dated post-Watergate stuff) — whomever. With their crude racism, Aryan looks, ruthless blue eyes and foreign accents, the Afrikaners fit the part of "the other." However, their visible similarities to movie gangsters and rednecks makes this "otherness" fit less than comfortably. Against them are Riggs (Mel Gibson) and Murtaugh (Danny Glover), a temperamentally and racially diverse pair of cops in a very happily integrated LAPD (Los Angeles Police Department) that shows no evidence of the tenure of police chief Gates. These buddies are joined by Leo (Joe Pesci) who is in a federal witness protection program.

The film combines different genres. Its eclecticism is smooth because we know the genres so well: the anti-communist movie (except the baddies are not communists); the espionage-crime thriller; Dirty Harry; and an odd-couple-cum-buddy movie that turns into a male-bonding, Three Stooges comedy. Within these generic formulae occur some unexpected touches — a didactic reference to the tuna boycott, a debate about condom commercials and TV's use of female sexuality, and depiction of a stable "normal" African American family. The film's major departure, however, is its use of racist South Africans as the bad guys. As such, they are utterly brutal — one of them tells Riggs soon after killing Riggs' new girlfriend that he also killed Riggs' wife four years before and that she died slowly and painfully. As it fights the racist devils, the LAPD acts as a racially integrated force and is presented as such without comment.[3]

This strategy is troublesome because race and racism are, in fact, the film's major themes. The South Africans concentrate their murderous attentions upon Murtaugh simply because he is black, and they constantly make racist remarks. They explain their smuggling by referring to South Africa's international isolation as a consequence of apartheid. Racism is therefore identified as a South African issue and not a U.S. one — which is especially untrue for the LAPD. The only (white) South African who betrays the cause does so because her loins lead her to Mel Gibson rather than because of any political or moral principle. She explains that the only thing she likes about her job (a secretary, of course) is that it enables her to live in L.A., i.e. to realize the American dream.

Using time-honored conventions (foreign accents, low angle shots, ugly faces shot close-up and surrounded by darkness, and a series of brutal deeds) in combination with a renewed U.S. public awareness about apartheid, LETHAL WEAPON 2 successfully creates a new villainy.

Certainly these villains are racists; few spectators could fail to be impressed by

their iniquity. More troubling, only U.S. characters pursue an anti-apartheid fight. Once again, U.S. heroes are saving the world; goodness and decency are defended by the U.S. male. For the most part this defense proceeds within the institutional framework of the LAPD, even when the racists attempt to kill Murtaugh and his family (African Americans). But when Riggs discovers that they killed his wife and his new lover, he rips off his police badge and pursues a personal revenge. The messages are clear:

- Fight within the rules and fail, or become a vigilante and succeed.
- Mess with the black man and his family and not much will happen, but mess with Mel's girl, mess with the white man — and you're a goner.

CRY FREEDOM and A DRY WHITE SEASON are not as violence-, stunt- and action-oriented as LETHAL WEAPON 2. Also, the former two films differ because they use Hollywood cinematic practices and resources to examine apartheid rather than just shamelessly take one element of apartheid repression and use it within well-established Hollywood formulae. What I wish to examine is whether or not they end up at the same place as LETHAL WEAPON 2.

CRY FREEDOM, A DRY WHITE SEASON, AND HOLLYWOOD CONVENTION

CRY FREEDOM and A DRY WHITE SEASON attempt to tell anti-apartheid stories within the confines of Hollywood convention. Both the directors, Richard Attenborough and Euzhen Palcy, wanted to reach a mass audience of the "unconverted," and they struggled for years to obtain Hollywood backing.[4] They knew that the audience was unattainable without the finance. They also knew that the studios demand adherence to certain conventions of narrative technique, high production values, big budgets, stars, impressive crowd scenes, exotic locations, and so on. The very structures that made these films possible also determined the films' form and content.

One of the Hollywood conventions most obviously adopted in these two films, is the need for action and lots of it. Both begin with dramatic action scenes. The story of A DRY WHITE SEASON unfolds at a particularly rapid clip, very unlike Palcy's first film, SUGAR CANE ALLEY. This reliance on rapid action sequences works against audience participation and any reading of nuance. (Contrast A DRY WHITE SEASON with other recent features by non-North Americans about equally weighty topics, such as Shohei Imamura's BLACK RAIN and Gaston Kabore's ZAN BOKO.)

WHITE TRANSGRESSORS IN THE DANGEROUS THIRD WORLD

CRY FREEDOM and A DRY WHITE SEASON are part of a sub-genre of films with a white, liberal man (usually a journalist) who functions in the plot as a "transgressor" in a dangerous third world situation. Other films of this type are THE KILLING FIELDS, THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY and SALVADOR. Presumably a film intended to appeal to audiences in developed nations must have as a main character a representative from one of these nations. That is the lowest common denominator the audience can identify with; someone to mediate between the audience ("self") and the exotica ("other").

In CRY FREEDOM white English-speaking newspaper editor Donald Woods (Kevin

Kline) functions as such a mediator-transgressor. Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) leader Steven Biko (Denzel Washington) educates Woods (and the audience) about his own country. As Woods explained about CRY FREEOM:

"...the Woods story was the necessary balance to the Biko story if mass audiences were to be reached in Europe and the United States." [5]

In *A DRY WHITE SEASON*, schoolteacher Ben du Toit (Donald Sutherland) takes this role. Although he is an Afrikaner, he and his family speak English. No distracting subtitles, please. In André Brink's novel upon which the script is based, du Toit is a college professor, but Palcy removed the main character's intellectual associations. [6] For all practical purposes du Toit is an investigator — a transgressor in a very literal sense. He is assisted by a black man, Stanley (Zakes Mokae), who doubles as a chauffeur. As an educated man who drives his taxi between black township and white city, Stanley could have been utilized as a mediating, transgressive character, but relative to Ben his character remains undeveloped. He is "more an icon than a character when compared with Ben." [7]

Both Woods and du Toit are liberals and decent men even before their radical catechisms. Having liberal protagonists enables the filmmakers to sidestep neatly the much more pressing, intransigent issue that actually confronts the South African democratic movement: How and why will conservative whites change? Woods and du Toit are sympathetic figures, reinforced by the favorable connotations that the star personae of Kline and Sutherland bring to their roles. These characters play safely in Peoria, if not in Pretoria. [8]

This typage applies even more to liberal lawyer McKenzie (Marlon Brando) in *A DRY WHITE SEASON*. Brando's character is a stock figure of film and television, taking up a futile court case and playing it quite delightfully — for the camera rather than the judge.

"The role is one of these humane, avuncular, Clarence Darrow knockoffs — the kind that Spencer Tracy and Orson Welles got to play..." [9]

The device of the white transgressor leads to trouble. In *CRY FREEOM* there is a double irony in that a white protagonist is used in a film about Steve Biko, a Black Consciousness leader. Even in death Biko is shown through white eyes. Not surprisingly this has led to a running dispute with the successors of the Black Consciousness Movement mantle about how to interpret the film. [10]

Black Consciousness aside, the persistence of the device raises the question as to why Hollywood is so reluctant to place a black person in the center of a film. By a strange perversity, Jamie Uys' *THE GODS MUST BE CRAZY* is an example of the fact that a film can focus on a non-white character and be a box office hit. Very differently, Richard Attenborough's *GANDHI* succeeded at the box office without a white transgressor — it seems that only a non-white person of the stature of Gandhi (also dead and a pacifist) allows the industry to dispense with the white hero. One final irony, while both Palcy and Attenborough position white men at the center of their narratives for box office reasons (Palcy denies this, but the script itself refutes her), in neither case did the strategy pay off. Both films have had lackluster box office returns and only a tepid critical reception. [11]

A WHITE FAMILY HAS A MELODRAMA

Both *CRY FREEOM* and *A DRY WHITE SEASON* are white family melodramas. The du Toits disintegrate because of Ben's politicization, and his daughter betrays him to the security police. Matching the du Toits in that film are the black Ngobene family; they are torn asunder by apartheid in a far more horrifying way — the police kill the eldest son, father and mother. Yet, despite Pacey's claims to the contrary, the script clearly develops the flu Toits as individuals and as a family more than it does the Ngobenes.[12] The du Toits barbecue, have a party, celebrate Christmas, work in the shed, argue, fight, weep, etc.. The only scene of all the Ngobenes together consists of a brief altercation between father and son that sketches a dichotomy between conservative older generation and radical youth. This imbalance gives the melodrama of *A DRY WHITE SEASON* an emphasis on whites that is compounded by the use of well-known stars for the white roles: Brando, Sutherland, Sarandon. The black actors, however, are little known, although the causes of this have nothing to do with Pacey.

The family melodrama in *CRY FREEOM* is even more troubling than in *A DRY WHITE SEASON*. Biko gets killed half way through. After that point the story revolves around the white family and their escape from South Africa. This has, in the words of a *Variety* critic, "the unmistakable feel of commercial calculation." [13] The film's story has little relation to Biko or what he stood for. Placing such emphasis upon the great escape is tedious and trivial in relation to Biko's fate. The film ends triumphantly with the Woods family flying over the South African veld, thus taking them to their true filmic position — in the developed world. The concluding scenes of the Soweto uprising, the scrolling of names of victims of police murder, and the stirring rendition of *Nkosi Sikelel' i Afrika*, cannot salvage the film.

THE HEROIC PERSPECTIVE

Family melodrama conventionally gives prominence to individual characters, their development and their actions. That these conventions dominate *CRY FREEOM* and *A DRY WHITE SEASON* is hardly surprising considering that they are stories about the individual political conversions of white men. The use of stars reinforces this tendency. There is little attempt to work against it or to integrate these stories into a larger, social context. *A DRY WHITE SEASON*, for example, ends with Stanley's shooting security policeman Stoltz (Jurgen Prochnow). It is an act that is laden with personal vindication and heroism, and provides a moment for easy applause, but it contradicts the praxis of the (anti-apartheid) armed resistance in South Africa. On a more general level, there is little connection between *A DRY WHITE SEASON*'s story and the larger society, whether pro- or anti-apartheid. The audience might wonder at the end what reason there was to publish the exposé of the security police, and who would read it.

Similarly, *CRY FREEOM* struggles to express the complexity of apartheid and resistance to apartheid within the confines of a film about the somewhat atypical Biko-Woods friendship. Although the impact of Biko's life and death on the Woods family is explored, there is little exploration of BC as an ideology or movement. The structure of the film implies that the Soweto uprising followed Biko's death, but a closer reading reveals the historical discontinuity — the uprising began in June

1976 and Biko was killed in September 1977. There is no indication that BC was and is only one strand of the democratic movement, but two portraits of Nelson Mandela imply a unity between BC and ANC. Political events since 1977 have made this hiatus more problematic. Even on the level of individual characters it is not clear why Biko was friendly with Woods. Why did Biko need Woods? While these questions are ignored, the film lingers on the Woods family and their escape, depicted (without exaggeration) in a heroic and dramatic style.

More than this emphasis upon individual action, *A DRY WHITE SEASON* and *CRY FREEOM* are as heavily male-dominated as is *LETHAL WEAPON 2*. The female characters have what are essentially bit parts. The men/boys are leaders and active; women/girls are either supportive or treacherous to their men. Impurities in the male heroes are eliminated. In *CRY FREEOM* Attenborough hides Biko's relationship with Mamphela Ramphele rather than his wife. In *A DRY WHITE SEASON* Pacey omits the affair in the novel between Ben and Melanie (Susan Sarandon). HBO's *MANDELA* omits any reference to Nelson Mandela's first wife of many years and mother to four of his children, and makes much of the romance with young and photogenic Winnie (Alfre Woodard). Only in Chris Menges' *A WORLD APART* are some of these elements of patriarchy challenged — and this is not a Hollywood production.

HETEROGENEITY AND HOMOGENEITY

Yet another area in which *CRY FREEOM* and *A DRY WHITE SEASON* fall prey to Hollywood convention, is in their structure of bipolar conflict. As argued above, South Africa does not fit this simple but alluring model; in Clifford Geertz's terms, South Africa requires "thick description," but what it invariably gets is "thin description."^[14] In *CRY FREEOM*, for example, the fact of black collaboration is omitted. When Attenborough was asked why there were no black policemen in his re-creation of the June 16, 1976 attack, he explained:

"To have had blacks firing at blacks, he [Attenborough] said, would have been 'too confusing', unless the film had taken time to explain how blacks, as well as whites, have been caught up in defending the apartheid system."^[15]

The conflict is depicted in purely racial terms between two sides, one good and one bad; the attractive Woods-Biko combo and the ugly, brutal, Nazi-like security police; "the self" and "the other" — shades of *LETHAL WEAPON 2*. This type of representation encourages disinformation at a time when Attenborough's "unconverted" audience most needs to grasp the sophisticated and insidious nature of apartheid, and the grave problems facing South Africa at the very moment that what was always portrayed as "the problem" appears to be disappearing.

In contrast, *A DRY WHITE SEASON* represents black collaboration with more fluency, e.g. there are several black policemen. There are suggestions in the beer hall scene, and in the exchange between Stanley and his son Jonathan about the value of education, that a range of opinion is expressed among black South Africans. Further nuance comes from the existence of sympathetic white characters who are not activists, such as McKenzie (Brando) and Melanie's piano-playing old father. Arguably, even some of the security police are portrayed as vaguely human. In these ways, *A DRY WHITE SEASON* at least attempts to represent the struggle

as something more fluid than a dualism between good and evil. As Palcy stated:

"The world is not composed of good people and bad people. To explain the conflict, it is important to show the different faces of apartheid." [16]

Formally, however, *A DRY WHITE SEASON* remorselessly cuts between black and white life: police brutality at the beer hall juxtaposed against the sporting atmosphere of a rugby game; a family barbecue in the leafy suburbs versus a small dark house in the township; the fuss being made over something from the barbecue that got into a white man's eye followed by a close-up of the painful lash marks on a young black boy's backside, and so on. These juxtapositions run the risk of numbing the audience, depicting an always obvious dichotomy between good and bad, and squashing all subtlety. This type of montage works against Palcy's aim of representing multiplicity and "different faces." Her style here is markedly different from that in her earlier *SUGAR CANE ALLEY*, which even occasionally crosses the line between subtlety and whimsy.

Other, more specific criticisms can be leveled against both films. Although both are self-proclaimed political films, they leave conspicuous gaps between the time during which their stories occurred (1975-1977) and the time that the films were made (1987, 1989). *A DRY WHITE SEASON* reduces all democratic political action to the level of the individual or the crowd; it gives no indication that strategies and organizations lead to change. *CRY FREEOM* misleads by concluding with the Soweto uprising and compressing the events of a year into one day. The Biko death scenes and inquest give no sense of the medical profession's complicity. *CRY FREEOM* obscures Biko's attitude towards violence, which has the effect of distancing the saintly Biko from the apparent radicalism of other resistance. (This might have been done so as to make Biko more sympathetic to white middle class audiences or because of the influence of Jack Briley, screenwriter on *GANDHI*. [17])

HISTORICAL VERACITY AND TRUTH

Having written all this, I want to reassert that *CRY FREEOM* and *A DRY WHITE SEASON* should not be discarded as utterly flawed and politically incorrect. Neither should it be thought that Attenborough and Palcy had anything but the best intentions: fighting to get their films made, visiting South Africa, meeting with people whose experiences bore on the stories, encouraging the use of their films as political vehicles, etc.. The two films contain many fine, moving moments, such as Biko's ripostes in the courtroom in *CRY FREEOM*, Brando's performance in *A DRY WHITE SEASON*, and the scene in *A DRY WHITE SEASON* when a group of whites express the opinion that blacks have double lives while a black woman is serving them drinks at the barbecue.

Both filmmakers made determined efforts to re-create the environment in which the narratives are located. Both films were made in Zimbabwe, a neighboring state. Those portions of *CRY FREEOM* that concern Biko remain faithful to Woods' account in his biography, Biko; the courtroom scenes are particularly vivid examples of fidelity to the record. [18] The opening raid on Crossroads settlement and Biko's funeral bear close similarity to photographs and documentary footage of these events. The same can be said for the Soweto massacre in *A DRY WHITE SEASON*. Keith Tribe argues that in historical film (both *A DRY WHITE SEASON* and *CRY FREEOM* are set in 1976-1977) "the veracity of the image" is an extremely

important means of achieving historical veracity, of persuading the viewer that s/he is witnessing historical "Truth." As Tribe puts it, "history is...recognized as Truth by the viewer not by virtue of the facts being correct, but because the image looks right." [19] In film, Cohn McCabe notes that there is "a classic relation between narrative and vision in which what we see is true and this truth confirms what we see." [20]

Interestingly, for both *CRY FREEDOM* and *A DRY WHITE SEASON* the audiences understanding of "what looks right" is based upon a further representation — news images from South Africa, especially of moments like June 16, rallies, funerals, and forced removals. It is no coincidence that such scenes are prominent in *CRY FREEDOM* and *A DRY WHITE SEASON*. Palcy's and Attenborough's attention to period visual realism is part of this verifying process, an "authenticity" reinforced by other stylistic choices: music, attempts (with varying degrees of success) to achieve South African accents, use of many South African actors and extras, news reporting devices (e.g. the teletype subtitles giving date and time during *CRY FREEDOM*'s opening sequence of the Crossroads raid), attention to detail (e.g. the Springbok jacket that du Toit wears when he visits the police station, in *A DRY WHITE SEASON*), and so on.

In connection with this historical authenticity, Woods describes why Attenborough decided to shoot the (fictitious) scene of Biko addressing a crowd at a soccer game while under a banning order:

"There was no cinematic way of showing satisfactorily how Steve Biko had circumvented his banning restrictions to communicate with many thousands of blacks through a column in my newspaper under another name, so Attenborough had hit upon the idea of a scene showing Biko, while hidden in the crowd, addressing spectators at a soccer game." [21]

Two points are relevant here. First, Woods errs in asserting, "no cinematic way." Certainly there are mildly unconventional ways of showing this, such as the newspapers and pseudo-documentaries in *CITIZEN KANE*. Second, Attenborough understood only part of the significance of Biko's "Frank Talk" column in Woods' newspaper. While it was a means of communication, it was also a tangible example of how black and white democrats could and have to cooperate. It was thus an answer to my earlier question: Why did Biko need Woods? The substitution of the soccer match fails utterly to express this dynamic.

Despite the best efforts of their makers, the conventional requirements of Hollywood cinema predetermined and overdetermined *A DRY WHITE SEASON* and *CRY FREEDOM*'s representations of apartheid and resistance to apartheid. A cinema of homogeneity cannot represent heterogeneity. South Africa is often represented without ambiguity in cinema. But this representation has more to do with its representers than with the represented. The fact that these films were Hollywood productions made them possible and made them what they are. Unfortunately, the strategy did not work well — filmically or at the box office.

For instance, the cover of the video of *A DRY WHITE SEASON* illustrates the central features of the film: on the front a half-merged silhouette of a black man and a white man. On the back, three small insert photographs: Sutherland, with Zakes Mokae half visible; Brando's face; and a seductive Sarandon. Behind the

inserts is an image of students marching in Soweto — the exotic backdrop for the famous. As a South African critic wrote, "South Africa reworked as international cliché." [22]

Similarly in CRY FREEDOM convention compromised good intentions and progressive content. Attenborough needed Biko's courage: not only to break convention by tackling a difficult topic but also to move beyond convention in his treatment of it.

NOTES

1. CRY FREEDOM, directed by Richard Attenborough. Universal, 1987; LETHAL WEAPON 2, directed by Richard Donner. Warner Brothers, 1989; A DRY WHITE SEASON, directed by Euzhan Palcy. MGM, 1989.
2. I use the words "colors" and "spectrum" to refer to multiple social identities of many kinds, neither purely or primarily race/skin color.
3. This is similar to the way that gayness in Fassbinder's FOX AND HIS FRIENDS is taken for granted.
4. Richard Attenborough, quoted in *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, November 11, 1987; Euzhan Palcy interviewed by Marlaine Glickamen, in *Film Comment*, September-October 1989, p. 65.
5. Donald Woods, *Filming with Attenborough: The Making of CRY FREEDOM* (New York: Henry Halt, 1987). p. 14.
6. André Brink, A DRY WHITE SEASON.
7. Stuart Klawans, in *The Nation*, October 30, 1989, p. 508,
8. Both CRY FREEDOM and A DRY WHITE SEASON ran afoul of the South African authorities and have only recently been released there.
9. Pauline Kael, in *The New Yorker*. October 2, 1989, p. 101; see also Stanley Kaufman, in *The New Republic*. October 9, 1989, p. 25.
10. For example, see *The Weekly Mail*, April 5-11, 1990.
11. For example, see *The Weekly Mail*, May 4-10, 1990, regarding the reception of A DRY WHITE SEASON in a township theatre.
12. Comments made by Euzhan Palcy at the San Francisco premiere of A DRY WHITE SEASON at Cinema 21, September 19, 1989; at San Francisco State University, April 27, 1990; and in interview by Marlaine Glicksman, in *Film Comment*, September-October 1989, p. 66.
13. Variety, November 4, 1987; see also *New York Times*, November 1, 1987.
14. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
15. *New York Times*, November 1, 1987.

16. Palcy interviewed by Madame Glicksman, in *Film Comment*, September-October 1989, p. 69.
17. Woods, *Filming with Attenborough*, pp. 111-112, 163.
18. Donald Woods, *Biko* (New York: Henry Holt, 1987), p. 147.
19. Keith Tribe, "History and the Production of Memories," in *Screen 18* (Winter 1977-1978), p. 16.
20. Cohn McCabe, quoted by Tribe, p. 16.
21. Woods, *Filming with Attenborough*, p. 100.
22. Fabius Burger, in *The Weekly Mail*, October 6-12, 1989.

[To top](#) [Current issue](#) [Archived essays](#) [Jump Cut home](#)

Anglophone African media

by N. Frank Ukadike

from *Jump Cut*, no. 36, May 1991, pp. 74-80

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In most English-speaking African countries, people have demanded what was variously called the "National Film Industry," "indigenous film production," or "national cinema" out of concern for what they regard as the undesirable socio-cultural and psychological impact of foreign films.[1][[open notes in new window](#)] Before independence (and in some cases the situation has not changed), foreigners totally controlled film distribution and exhibition. They imported films into English speaking African countries from the United States, Britain, China, Hong Kong or India. Needless to say, the films identified ideologically and aesthetically with the socio-cultural values of the producer nation — in all ramifications they are different from those produced on the African continent.

Black Africans realize that U.S. films pervade the market. For example, the Tarzan series, regardless of their negative impact on African culture as a whole, were exhibited with impunity. The most devastating cultural damage these films did to Africa was to instill in the minds of most of the viewers the "dominating image" of the white man over the African. Then came the impact of the westerns. The characters were always tough, fast-shooting horsemen — U.S. cowboys. Their main objective was to shoot and kill the American Indian by the thousands as the cowboys drove them from their land and slaughtered the buffalo. It is difficult to say if viewers' excitement paralleled the horrifying scenes, but the most disturbing aspect is that African youth acquired new attitudes from the movies. As one critic put it, "Every street had its Django and Palooka, while every 'tough guy' around saw himself as the undisputed double of John Wayne." [2] In Nigeria, Chinese films introduced martial arts which then became popular among Nigerian youth.

It is important to note that while the Indian and Kung Fu movies played in urban theaters, U.S. films had a double advantage — exhibiting in the theaters and also in mobile cinemas which penetrated every nook and cranny of the rural areas. The mobile cinema has been an integral arm of capitalistic, multi-national companies who use the cinema to reach villagers (who have no access to television or radio) to advertise their products. The operation begins with the mobile cinema van arriving in the village during the day, announcing through amplified loudspeakers the arrival of *silima ofe* (free cinema), scheduled for that evening. The venue is usually an open field — either a school compound or community ground. When potential customers pack the space, products are advertised (via oral announcements) followed by a film. Halfway through (or at times more than once depending on the

length of the film) the film is stopped to enable the merchants to sell their goods to the audience. For most villagers *silima ofe* provided great entertainment and often their first opportunity to watch a moving image on screen.[3] But critics found drawbacks to this rural foray, as there were no warnings as to violence, sex, or obscene language on screen; *silima ofe* had no age restrictions.

The story of African cinema offers a lesson in struggle against bureaucratic and economic forces which began in colonial times and reaches into the present. In the anglophone region, the struggle for survival has a long history of expediency and entrepreneurial maneuverability, which makes film production activities quite different in purpose — politically or economically — from that of its counterpart, the francophone region.

Different patterns of film production within francophone and anglophone regions derive from the contrasting ideological pursuits of the colonial French and British governments. For example, while the French pursued a so-called assimilation policy. British involvement with its colonies was pragmatic business. Similarly, observers point out that while the French "gave" feature film to its colonies, the British "gave" theirs documentary. France seemed to adopt a cultural policy that encouraged production in the francophone region, whereas the anglophone region (where film production did not pass the economic priority test) resolved to cling to the British tradition of documentary filmmaking. And British documentary production in Africa emphasized selected areas of national concern; for instance, tourism, educational documentaries, and propaganda films, especially about the political engagement of heads of state and some high ranking government functionaries.

Clearly, these kinds of documentaries could not provide the bold challenge needed to combat the impact of foreign films, nor could they satisfy the appetite of citizens who see meaningful results emerging only from a well-coordinated national industry.

From this standpoint, television now finds itself unavoidably playing a dual role in the crusade for cultural justice. In a positive role, many of the television stations do produce culturally relevant programs. But with Africa's economic situation worsening, government funding of television programs and documentary films has been significantly cut, forcing the stations to operate on lower budgets, which hampers funding for innovative projects. Immediately after independence, television stations had not planned for adequate indigenous programming to fill their airtime. Consequently, foreign programs filled the vacuum.

Considering that television programming in these countries often serves to promote the narrow interests of the regime in power — civilian or military — television too often becomes the voice and praise-singer of governments, mingled with frugal doses of entertainment and instruction. In some cases that transcend this situation, we find programs of real interest motivating national consciousness. In most African states, finding a willing audience has never been a problem for locally produced television programs especially if they are authentic and devoid of apish Westernisms or indigenous banality.[4]

Ghana's television, considered as one of the legacies of the late president Kwame Nkrumah, was inaugurated in 1965, eight years after independence. Ghana

Broadcasting Corporation Television (GBC-TV), which had stopped issuing television licenses to the public, is now considering their restoration in the face of improved services.[5] The impetus television had at first seems to have been revived under the head of government Jerry Rawlings who expressed concern to combat "cultural colonialism" through cooperation with television writers and producers bent on using television to foster education and entertainment. For example, one of the oldest, OSOFO DADZIE, has been running since 1972 and continues to be GBC-TV's most watched program. This hour-long Sunday evening drama focuses on aspects of life in Ghanaian society. According to West Africa's critic, Nanabanyin Dadson, as long as the social vices which this program portrays "remain relevant," OSOFO DADZIE will continue to inspire Monday morning discussions "at work places, markets and schools." [6] Among the vices it describes are bribery, corruption, nepotism, profiteering and greed. The secret of its success seems to lie in the subtle humor with which it exposes the social ills and contradictions of this evolving society. In addition, its authentic local setting is so real — as one admirer put it — that people just cannot stop laughing at themselves.

With OSOFO DADZIE's popularity, GBC-TV has made some commercial incursions — dubbing the program and others onto video cassettes for distribution in Ghana and abroad. But this is "the fourth spin-off of the OSOFO DADZIE success, following live stage performances, publication of a comic strip series and the making of feature-length video films." [7] Administrators hope this enhanced profitability will relieve the government of its financial burden and commitment to the Corporation.

In addition to the television network, Ghana has a national film production center, The Ghana Film Industry Corporation (GFIC), established after its independence from Britain in 1957. This Corporation is the offspring of the old Gold Coast Film Unit (deriving its name from Ghana's colonial one) formed in 1948 by the British as an extension of the Colonial Information Service. The major difference in the two groups' structures was that the Gold Coast Film Unit was not a viable self-sustaining production unit upon which a national film industry could be built during postcolonial restructuring. Ghana's quest for the integration of film into its national culture led to it having an enviable modern amenity and a sophisticated production center. According to the production center's first director, Sam Aryetey, Ghana possessed "the best cinematographic infra-structure in tropical Africa." [8]

After independence when Kwame Nkrumah took the reigns of power as Ghana's first president, film distribution and production were nationalized and thus the spotlight on a national industry began. In the years 1957-1966, modern film production facilities sprang up. Facilities readily available included film and sound studios, 35mm and 16mm black and white processing laboratories, and editing rooms. The GFIC's deterioration began with the overthrow of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah's government. One of the restructuring activities of the new regime was to confiscate the films made by the Corporation, which, the military charged, helped build the President's "personality cult."

A new director, Sam Aryetey, a filmmaker, was appointed to direct the activities of the GFIC. Apart from producing some important newsreels, between 1968 and 1972 the Corporation had to its credit a number of culturally significant feature films. They include Ghana's first feature film, NO TEARS FOR ANANSE (35mm,

1968) by Sam Aryetey, which was based on a traditional Ananse folktale; I TOLD YOU SO (1970) by Egbert Adjesu which featured Bob Cole, the famous Ghanaian concert performer/actor; and DO YOUR OWN THING (1971) by Bernard Odjidja, BBC London-trained, whose subject concerned the local music scene of a young Ghanaian girl aspiring to become a soul-singer.

Such an encouraging development would have indicated a positive future for Ghana's film industry in terms of a large output of feature films. The GFIC had an unique status as the first venture of its kind in Africa with facilities to make films from conception to finish, as Senegalese filmmaker Paulin Soumanou Vieyra put it, the GFIC "had equipment capable of completing a dozen feature films a year."^[9] But as it turned out, the initial impetus of GFIC seems to have fallen by the wayside. Its foremost problems were administrative. This culminated in the pursuit of an incorrect policy, which was not only going to slow down the progress of aspiring Ghanaian filmmakers, but was also detrimental to the economic role envisaged for the Corporation as a self-sustaining industry.

Aryetey embarked upon a policy of co-production with foreign countries in Europe at the expense of local filmmakers who needed financial assistance to function. The result of his involvement with the Italian director Giorgio Bontempi in the making of CONTACT (1976) and Mike Fleetwood in the making of THE VISITOR was financially catastrophic. Because of these dismal box-office failures the GFIC was less inclined to push for further government financial assistance. For over a decade the Corporation was incapacitated, producing no feature films either on its own or in partnership with foreign producers.

However, the GFIC has not neglected its social responsibility in making documentaries. They have a steady output of documentaries partly because it is easier to get government funding to make films about the programs which African leaders have for political development, public enlightenment and education. SOLIDARITY IN STRUGGLE (1984) is a film that has brought recognition to and solidified the achievements of the Corporation's documentary production. Shown in the 1985 Pan-African Film Festival in Ouagadougou, it won the Golden Camera Award. But since the decade of the 1980's has had the slowest economy Ghana has experienced since independence, making the Gross National Product (GNP) and per capita income very low, one would assume that the GFIC has settled comfortably into just documentary film production.

Kenyan television is virtually under the control of the government. Since 1985 that control has further tightened to promote political propaganda. According to Mr. Odindo, television critic for *The Nation* (newspaper of Nairobi), complaints from viewers range from the impact of non-African programs to the numerous hours devoted to "the routine speeches by government officials and songs and slogans of the sole party, (the Kenyan African National Union) and mediocre drama productions."^[10] Like Ghana however, some encouraging developments have lately been instigated as the government is now increasing indigenous programming and exchanging productions with other African countries. Odindo cites the growing audience interest in entertainment programs and documentaries relating to African culture. According to him, musical shows from Cameroon and Congo distributed through the Union of National Radio and Television Organizations of Africa (URTNA) are well received in Kenya. It is also widely

believed that the informal educational programs imported from Ivory Coast helped to increase preventive health care and agricultural techniques. Another boost in audience expectation came from what Odindo describes as the smashing of "third-rate studio comedies [of the Kenyan television] with a crisply produced romantic drama on teenage pregnancies." The fourteen-part series called *Usiniharakishe*, meaning "DON'T RUSH ME," was banned, however, after only two episodes following protests registered by parents who found the episodes' treatment of premarital sex too lascivious.[11]

In 1987, a new and effective method was developed. The soap opera, *Tushauriane* (LET'S DISCUSS I'll is a bold move by the Kenyan government in its effort to disseminate information about birth control in this East African nation which has about 4% population growth rate — the world's highest. Produced by the Voice of Kenya, the series is based on a "scientifically researched communication technique" similar to the one developed and broadcast in Mexico in 1977/1978. *Tushauriane* was produced with great care, avoiding the type of problems that marred the acceptance of its predecessor.

To achieve the intended goal, the producers developed situations for the characters designed to parallel the audience's experiences. This Kenyan experiment indicates how black African film and television aesthetics seek to establish its identity through exploring the social conditions of the entire populace. On the other hand, its strict production code emphasizes a realistic choice of images. This strategy, in terms of audience propensity, creates a "people's media." In time, projects like this can help reverse the failed attempts by foreign film and television producers to deal with Africa's social issues.

In anglophone states, commitment to film and television production assumes various forms of implementation. The Kenyan Film Corporation (KFC) established in 1968, is a government agency charged with the promotion and growth of the film industry and also is responsible for the distribution of films, but so far it has only been active in distribution. U.S. movies make up the bulk of the films it imports, followed by Indian romantic melodramas and Chinese Kung Fu films, which are primarily exhibited in the cities where theaters are located. The KFC also has exhibited a few African films, which it is anticipated will increase in the near future.

In addition, Kenya has a well-organized mobile cinema industry which takes films "on wheels" to a rural audience. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Federal Films Limited, and Film Corporation of Kenya are three major organizations that operate mobile cinemas in the country. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting distributes "educational" and "nation-building" films; it is government funded and does not accept advertising. The other mobile cinema companies are basically advertising agencies offering services to multinational companies, with entertainment films used as a "crowd gatherer."

Nigerian television in its present form has become mired in a malady of political public relations. The country's first television station (which was the first in Africa) started its transmissions in 1959 from Ibadan, the capital of Western Nigeria (now of Oyo State). This was one year before Nigeria's independence. The oil boom of the 1970s heralded the creation of new states within Nigeria and the establishment of television stations which came to be known as Nigerian Television Authority

(NTA), whose number is now well over thirty-seven. With each state, by right, entitled to one federally owned television station, the number increased during the second republic. At that time, state governments, hoping to disseminate information from the perspective of party ideology, established television stations named after their states.

It was here that the states' uncompromising attitude reached an unprecedented height when they began to use their stations to confront Federal Television Stations, which as a rule, were loyal to the ruling party controlling the Federal government. When the power in the state was of the same party as the Federal government, the state television stations painted oblique pictures of the opposition. Each of these stations sang the praises and bolstered the egos of political leaders. Although the return to military rule did bring restraint of a kind, Nigerian broadcasters have not refrained from making television the tom-tom that drums the praises of top Federal Government functionaries and that of its luminaries in the state capitals.

In the early years of television in Nigeria, the studios functioned along with film divisions whose films, notably documentaries, made a major impact on programming. By the mid-1970s however, the significance of celluloid power had waned, and in the 1980s film was largely displaced by the video format.

With all of the television stations abandoning their filmmaking units, their equipment has been tragically left to rust away. Even with relying on video due to its low operational cost, the major problem still facing NTA is maintenance of equipment. The Authority has more unusable equipment discarded as junk than it has equipment functioning in the field. As a phenomenon symptomatic of the general condition tolerated by all government establishments here, it would require a separate study to explain the reasons why a lack of cooperation cripples productivity in this part of the world.

Vincent Maduka, the former Director General of NTA, acknowledged the Authority's problems are twofold, namely: 1) human, neglecting to hire people with the "right aptitude and potential" for both the job and further training for the job; and 2) material, in that lack of money and technology form inhibiting factors.[12] The director did not blame NTA's misfortune on the problem of funding alone, which every other government director has blamed for the agency's incompetency and poor performance. He said that WA would have been able to, "perform twice as well ...with the same amount of money if...the staff are better motivated, more excited and persistent about what they can do and what television can do." [13] His words echo the views of some disenchanted observers and specifically, my own contention why mediocrity has become an institution NTA may not be able to demolish.[14]

To combat such a situation, adequate hiring procedures should take the place of the somewhat random selection of cameramen, directors, or producers by executives (sometimes political appointees). Currently, administrators see the opportunity to practice tribalism, favoritism, and nepotism by giving creative jobs to their brothers, sisters, nephews and nieces, girlfriends and others, without qualifications for the job they are employed to do.

Although NTA is an autonomous institution, its budget is provided by the Federal

Government and as indicated, television's first and foremost must capture every aspect of government's propaganda, such as the government's accomplishments and what it proposes to do; also it must build up policy makers' egos. It makes some coordinated efforts to put on a few entertainment programs (though marred by shoestring budgets), sports, and some educational programs (which the government is more willing to finance) and share other transmission time. Clearly, the news and current affairs units are better equipped. This branch contributes to the personality cult of leaders. It offers formulaic praises of leaders' lives accompanied by still photographs which remain endlessly fixed on the screen, and such a combination of image and sound sums up the aura of the images transmitted daily.

From its initial stages, comedy and drama have been the staple of programming provided by the NTA's entertainment wing, and most of these are very popular with the audience. For example, the oldest and most highly rated television program to date is THE VILLAGE HEADMASTER series which has been running for two decades and, as its renaming to THE NEW VILLAGE HEADMASTER indicates, seems to have come to stay permanently. The cast and crew have changed and so has its format, which moved from studio to location shooting. NTA long ago devised a system of broadcasting which it calls "network programming" whereby some selected programs are transmitted to the entire nation from its headquarters in Lagos. "Network programming" also selects items like documentary films produced in other states on a quota basis to show nationally. Although Nigeria's "quota policy"[15] is considered retrogressive by critics, network programming still elicits cultural education and knowledge through varied entertainment choices and viewpoints, widening the path of knowledge about events in other states.

Besides THE VILLAGE HEADMASTER, produced in Lagos, Enugu produces NEW MASQUERADE and Kaduna, SAMANJA. Many more entertainment programs do not make it to the national network for one reason or another. In its quest for expansion with acceptable quality programs (its limited resources notwithstanding) NTA vigorously seeks sponsorship by multinational corporations, and response from this commercial sector has helped NTA generate funds and become (partially) competitive. Out of this endeavor, the 1980s has witnessed joint or partial partnership with independent producers and COCK CROW AT DAWN, MOMENT OF TRUTH, and MIRROR IN THE SUN have all achieved international recognition and all have won Union of National Radio and Television Broadcasting Organizations of Africa (URTNA) awards at various times. Corporate sponsorship is encouraging, but given the worsening economic outlook and the hardening austerity measures the government has imposed, corporate sponsorship of programs has dwindled. Hardest hit are young independent producers. As a recent example indicated, the producers of MIRROR IN THE SUN, a popular television series based on family life, had hoped the program would be sponsored by the manufacturers and importers of child-care products in Nigeria, but foreign exchange restrictions had crippled the manufacturing industries, import and retail businesses, and had left cosmetic shelves empty.[16]

Television's role in national development no doubt should seek to communicate indigenous issues of social concern. But for television to become "the conscience of the nation," it must pursue a philosophy of decolonizing the mind. Raising consciousness has been an arduous task for African television establishments and

WA in particular. A recent NTA program, *BASI AND COMPANY*, raises a perennial question occurring in African films (Sembene's *XALA*, Senegal 1974, and Alassane's *DEELA*, Niger 1969) and literature (expressed in the dichotomy between Nigeria's Achebe and Kenya's wa Thiong'o. This question is about the appropriateness of using European languages for African film, television, and literature.

For *THE VILLAGE HEADMASTER* and most other popular comedy shows on Nigerian television, the language which delivers the laughs is pidgin English. This does not mean that other programs produced in standard English do not captivate the audience. In fact, *BASI AND COMPANY* uses pidgin English to satirize Nigerians and the audience loves it. Reminiscent of Sembene's *XALA*, which articulates questions of language, culture, and power, television fictions in Nigeria and Ghana, for instance, commonly use as a structure the oppositions resulting from Africa's dual existence (Western cultural influences upon traditional culture). In them we find symbols contiguous of this two-sidedness in characters who represent the colonized imitators of European fashion, who speak the Queen's English, wear ties and suits, love Western music, fast cars, and money; other characters represent a progressive synthesis of Africa and Europe. They speak good English but prefer to communicate in Pidgin English (now a written language which combines English words with African grammar and syntax) and are more attuned to traditional cultures. Here, societal conflicts, contingent upon the languages used to express them, bring to the audience a strong charge of political, social, and cultural tension. I will now examine *EAST AND COMPANY* along these lines.

Produced by Saros International, an independent production company. *BASI AND COMPANY* is a series which airs every Wednesday. It attracts an estimated audience of over thirty million people — drawing about the same crowd as *THE VILLAGE HEADMASTER*. And like Ghana's *OSOFO DADZIE*, its subject is real and the structure similar — hammering on Nigeria's social vices, especially the self-destructive, get-rich-quick mentality regarded as the cankerworm ravaging the socio-economic fabric of this once-rich African nation. The episodes have plots which revolve around the star of the show, Basi, whose character is the topic of conversation everywhere in the country. He reveals the 1980s societal atmosphere. He is at once a dreamer and a con-artist. The social atmosphere which *BASI AND COMPANY* lampoons stems from the country's mood in the 1970s. At that time in the glory years of Nigeria's oil wealth, national income rose dramatically. (Economic and political power were so closely intertwined that Nigeria even flexed its muscles with Britain by nationalizing British Petroleum in Nigeria as a signal of what was to come if the British sponsored Lancaster talk [17] did not tilt in favor of Zimbabwean independence.) A social and cultural dilemma emerged from this sudden influx of wealth. Unfortunate consequences occurred in the nation's psychology when unscrupulous individuals acquired millions of naira without working for it. *BASI*'s social evangelism is didactic. It stresses the need for citizens to eschew materialism and return to hard work. That's the best way for Nigeria to stand up again after its wealth has been looted by its own unscrupulous people.

While *BASI*'s theme wins universal approval, and while the series constitutes an effective way to use the film and television medium to focus on important issues, still its method is controversial. It uses standard English at a time when African

filmmakers and literary essayists are urging Africans to make films and write novels in the African languages. In fact, Nigeria's Minister of Information, Mr. Tony Momoh, praised the show for its good English. This statement ratifies the official government's thinking that substandard English (pidgin) used on television causes low scores in the General Certificate of Education (G.C.E.) English language examination for Nigerian students.[18] A similar view was expressed by the show's producer Mr. Saro-Wiwa, who stated that the nation "should go for proper English so we can relate to the rest of the world." [19]

Such an opportunistic statement defies the interest of the uneducated masses, who form the majority of the population and who probably suffer most from the wrath of social decay that BASI AND COMPANY attacks. In Bendel State, for example, there is an ongoing interaction between the literate and illiterate communities, the basis of which is the fact that pidgin English is widely used and understood by the uneducated. Television here uses pidgin English programs [20] to provide an antidote for the lack of linguistic unity. Sadly, this nation's lawmakers did not have the foresight at independence thirty years ago to institute, if necessary by mandate, a national language in order to create unity within the country. The fact is that language barriers institute tribalism and tribalism is the greatest saboteur of Nigerian unity.

BASI AND COMPANY has other qualities in its role as the promoter of national culture. Its authenticity is exemplified in the characters played by the two female stars, Ms. Ikpo-Douglas and Mildred Iweka. These women are for Nigerian women what the hostess of WHEEL OF FORTUNE represents for some U.S. women — a distinct figure, distinguished for materialistic reasons. For example, BASI's women appear in the episodes looking gorgeous — always clad in traditional attire. Because Nigerian women love to keep up with fashion and because these two women represent traditional costume, the program is especially captivating. Women viewers often want to copy how to knot the head-tie and make it stand out so beautifully and ostentatiously or how to match their head-tie with a wrapper like that (just as U.S. women who tune into WHEEL OF FORTUNE want to see "what Vanna is wearing tonight"). BASI thus represents pride in what is African, thereby deconstructing the myth perpetuated by colonial ideology that African culture is not good enough. Now we can see that television used imaginatively in a proper way becomes a potent catalyst for changing practices and attitudes, and it can also articulate a challenge for accelerated development.

Despite this partial but inevitable opening to independent television production, WA (from the effect of financial and bureaucratic red-tape) still cannot sustain its airtime with indigenous productions. NTA has no agreement with the Federal Film Unit to show their documentaries on a regular basis. Instead it uses monotonous reruns and fills program schedules with foreign music videos, U.S. and British films and sitcoms. Up to now it has not been deemed necessary to integrate NTA facilities with those at the Federal Ministry of Information to initiate feature film production.

The story of the Federal Film Unit is a depressing one; it has failed to utilize its facilities and expertise to build a viable film industry in Nigeria. The Federal Film Unit has as its stated objective documentary production and exhibition, and that was integrated with the Federal Ministry of Information shortly after

independence. The Film Unit has large departments for film direction, scriptwriting, camera, sound, editing, laboratory, exhibition, still and live-action cameras, and facilities for animation. Because its activity is supposed to sustain the requirement of Federal agencies throughout the country, it has a large staff of approximately five hundred people on its payroll. But as Françoise Balogun aptly states in her book *The Cinema in Nigeria*, this establishment, to be effective, requires "extensive reorganization and reorientation, since the informative and educative role it is supposed to play is considered impeded by the inertia of an obsolete and inefficient administration." [21]

This brief survey has shown the potential of anglophone film and television. If centered within African states' cultural specificities, and if properly integrated, both film and television can effectively foster development, education and understanding. These media could be put in the service of nation building. They could relay messages about people's history, needs, and aspirations. The media could touch people's consciousness and inspire change or question the status quo. But government-controlled documentary film units and television stations have been moving in slow motion toward realizing these goals.

The inability to accomplish this objective fully comes mostly from anglophone Africa's policy makers' nonchalant attitude toward the importance of art and culture. I believe that the medium of television, vis-à-vis film, is essential to anglophone Africa's development, culturally, economically and politically. National TV stations and film units should primarily function as exhibition channels for locally produced programming. Film and television should reflect the new dynamics of cultural struggle and social change in post-independent Africa. Television programming should also, however, accommodate non-African programs selected for their enlightenment. On the broadest scale, constructive action, diligent cultural orientation and a sense of fortitude are necessary to meet the demands and challenges of the changing African world. Thus, television should not only serve governmental interests but also expand its own role. Television must accommodate the burgeoning independent film practice (as in Ghana and Nigeria) and also support indigenous filmmakers by broadcasting their work.

NOTES

1. For example, the movies were brainwashing the youth into regarding everything Western as superior to anything African. Thus concerned people felt a need to call for African cinema that would portray African realities in the best light.

2. Cited in Niyi Osundare, "A Grand Escape into Metaphysics," *West Africa*, 12 May 1980, p. 827.

3. This type of free mobile cinema was not only popular in the anglophone states but also in some francophone states, and it was first used by the British colonial government to explain the war to villagers, to encourage them to practice thrift, and to help the war effort. (See *Colonial Cinema*, March 1945, pp. 11-14.)

4. See N. Frank Ukadike, "Theatre on the Screen: A Filmmakers View on Nigerian Television." *Nigerian Theatre Journal* 2.1-2, 191-197.

5. Ajoa Yeboah-Afari, "From Apologies to Praises," *West Africa* 2 (March, 1988),

783.

6. Nanabanyin Dadson, "TV's Most Wanted Men," *West Africa* 2 (March. 1988), 782.

7. Ibid.

8. "Interview With Sam Aretery" as quoted in Manthia Diawara, "Sub-Saharan African Film Production: Technological Paternalism," *JUMP CUT* 32, p. 63.

9. Ibid.

10. Joseph Odindo, "African Nations Struggle to Make Television Their Own," *New York Times*, Sunday, Dec. 28, 1986, p. E3.

11. Ibid.

12. See "Twenty-Five Years of Television Broadcasting in Nigeria" (interview with Vincent Maduka) in *Television Journal* 4 (Lagos, April-June, 1984), 20-24.

13. Ibid.

14. N. Frank Ukadike, op. cit.

15. This quota system is an "unequal opportunity employer" because it allows for disproportionate distribution of Federal jobs, scholarships and so on. These positions are not filled by merit. For instance, states with a high literacy rate will have candidates dumped in favor of lesser-qualified candidates from states with a low literacy rate.

16. Iyabo Aina, "Face To Face With Lola Fanikayode," *Television Journal* 4 (Lagos, April-June, 1984), 27.

17. British sponsored negotiations that worked out an independence schedule for Zimbabwe in 1979.

18. The General Certificate of Education examination is a prerequisite for admission to Nigerian Universities.

19. James Brooke, "30 Million Nigerians Are Laughing, at Themselves," *The New York Times*, Friday, July 24, 1987. p. A4.

20. Including a recently introduced daily six o'clock evening news.

21. Françoise Balogun, *The Cinema in Nigeria* (Enugu, Nigeria: Delta Publications, 1987), p. 22. See this writer's review of this book in *UFAHAMU* 17.1 (Fall 1998), 77-80.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Take a Giant Step. A Raisin in the Sun The U.S. black family film

by Mark A. Reid

from *Jump Cut*, no. 36, May 1991, pp. 81-88

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THE BLACK FAMILY FILM AND INDEPENDENT BLACK FILM COMPANIES

The earliest black family films were produced by independent black producers who used African American writers for the scripts. These black writers used their own creative talents to write original screenplays, or they made film adaptations from black literary works. For example, the Frederick Douglass Film Company produced *THE COLORED AMERICAN, OR WINNING HIS SUIT* (1916) which was written by Rev. W.S. Smith, a black Baptist minister. *THE COLORED AMERICAN* resembled Lincoln family films because the film dealt with a black hero proving his worth, and the plot ends with him returning to his black family. In May 1917, the Frederick Douglass Company premiered a Paul Laurence Dunbar film adaptation of his short story, "The Scapegoat." The production of *THE SCAPEGOAT* pioneered film adaptations of African American literary works.

The Lincoln Motion Picture Company's *THE REALIZATION OF A NEGRO'S AMBITION* (1916) and *THE TROOPER OF COMPANY K* (1916) were written by Noble M. Johnson, the company's president and male lead. This motion picture company was probably one of the first African American companies to have its president and featured actor, Noble Johnson, write their scenarios. Oscar Micheaux wrote a screen adaptation of his first novel for his first film, *THE HOMESTEADER* (1919). Micheaux also adapted Charles Chesnutt's 1900 novel, *The House Behind the Cedars* (1923).

These black independent film producers established the practice of employing black writers, actors and directors to write scenarios. This practice allowed black film productions to express the black perspective in both their aural and visual languages as well as their production strategies.

LEGAL, SOCIAL, AND INDUSTRIAL CONDITIONS INFLUENCING HOLLYWOOD'S PRODUCTION OF BLACK FAMILY FILMS

Hollywood did not produce black family films written by African American writers until the late 1950s. Between the 1940s and late 1950s, legal, industrial, and social conditions opened a way for these films. In 1948, the Supreme Court, in the United

States v. Paramount Pictures, et al. forced five major Hollywood producers (Paramount Pictures, Twentieth Century-Fox, Warner Brothers, Loew's, Inc. (MOM), and RICO Corporation) to divest themselves of the movie houses that they controlled. This divestiture reduced studio control over the ever-increasing number of independent producers who might want to produce a black family film. In addition, movie theaters could take independent (non-Production Code Administration) films once the theaters were separated from studios. Michael Conant writes,

"In 1946 it is estimated that the number of independent producers reached seventy. The Census of Manufactures reported one hundred theatrical film-producing companies in 1947...By 1957 the number of full-time producers operating as independents was estimated at 165. In addition, many independent production firms have been organized solely to make one or two pictures or primarily to make shorter television films; they enter theatrical film production only secondarily and if a special opportunity arises)."[1][[open notes in new window](#)]

In 1952, the Court ruled in *Burstyn v. Wilson* that movies had the same First Amendment rights as those held by print media. This decision affected at once Hollywood's self-censorship organ, the Production Code Administration (PCA). The Code which

"had been a barrier to the entry of independent producers, found its power of enforcement markedly reduced by the divorcement."[2]

In 1956, the Production Code was revised to fit its suggested purpose

"of barring obscenity rather than its monopoly purpose of barring novelty."[3]

By 1958, the Code had been liberalized, the number of independent producers increased, and novelty of theme and treatment became a possible reality in Hollywood:

"The effect of the decline in total output of the majors was to create excess capacity in the form of idle studios and underutilized systems of nationwide distribution exchanges. Paradoxically, the very firms that had created the barriers to independent production in the prewar period were by 1950 vying to lease studio space to independent producers and to distribute films for them."[4]

A third important postwar condition, the growth of the television market and its ability to become a major source of family entertainment, forced the film industry to create fins for special markets. In addition to the film industry's new interest, the new "legal freedoms provided filmmakers with opportunities to explore themes, visual representation, and dialogue that had been off-limits for the family film, economic factors provided the necessity [for liberalizing the Code]...With the enormous growth after World War II, television challenged and then in a short time completely usurped" Hollywood as the major producer of family entertainment.[5] Television also became a major outlet for Hollywood films.

Still another liberalizing effect on postwar Hollywood was the society's changing residential demographics. Most of the more profitable first-run theaters were once located in the downtown area of big cities. During the postwar period of suburbanization, the white lower-middle and middle-class families moved out of large cities and away from the first-run theaters.

"Financed by easy money at low interest rates, by sympathetic federal mortgage policy and often directly by the Veterans Administration, millions of [white] families moved out of city tenements. The western frontier had been closed by 1890...But now, after 1945, it seemed that U.S. society had found a new frontier in the suburbs." [6]

Consequently, Hollywood needed to produce films that would attract the African American movie-going audiences who remained in the city and frequented the first-run movie theaters.

In contrast to independent Hollywood producers who seemed to welcome the controversy of black films, major Hollywood producers tended to finance works that used popular genres to soften most serious treatments of black socio-cultural experiences which might alienate a white audience.[7] Thus, film studios chose black-oriented family films rather than black-oriented crime thrillers because the family concept was a more palatable genre for the broadest of audiences.

These legal decisions, industrial changes and socio-economic realities temporarily pressured Hollywood independent producers and major studios into producing black family films for first-run, metropolitan exhibition houses. Simultaneously other forces encouraged Hollywood to accept blacks as scenarists for such films in the late Fifties.

LITERARY FORCES ENCOURAGING THE USE OF BLACK WRITERS

The opportunities for black screenwriters resulted in part from Hollywood interest in film adaptations literary works and partly from its recognition of the popularity of black-authored literary works. Hollywood's preference for screen adaptations of popular works is evidenced by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences creation of the Best Writing Award for the Best Adapted Screenplay in 1956. This move affected the subject matter and themes that Hollywood films dramatized, since

"the decline of original scripts in favor of films based on popular novels [and plays inextricably tied the larger studios to the increasing permissiveness of U.S. fiction." [8]

During the 1940s some novels by African Americans had become so popular that Hollywood decided to adapt them into films. In the 40s, however, Hollywood studios refused to hire black scenarists to write or adapt black literary works for the screen. Yet Twentieth Century-Fox, in 1947, adapted Frank Yerby's bestseller *The Foxes of Harrow* (1946); Colombia adapted, in 1949 and 1960 respectively, Willard Motley's *Knock on Any Door* (1947) and his *Let No Man Write My Epitaph* (1958); and MGM adapted *Bright Road* (1953), and Mary E. Vroman's short story entitled "See How They Run" (1951).

Moreover, black-oriented plays written by African Americans were becoming increasingly accepted by Manhattan playgoers and drama critics during the 1950s. In 1953, Louis Peterson's *Take a Giant Step* appeared on Broadway. *Take a Giant Step* was revived off-Broadway in 1956 and received critical acclaim. The off-Broadway Greenwich Mews Theatre produced William Branch's historical dramatization of John Brown and Frederick Douglass, *In Splendid Error* (1954). The Greenwich Mews also produced Alice Childress' satire on black stereotypes, *Trouble in Mind* (1957) as well as Loftin Mitchell's *A Land Beyond the River* (1957) which dramatized the topic of school desegregation. In 1959, the most significant event of the decade for black theater occurred when Lorraine Hansberry earned the Critics Circle Award for *A Raisin in the Sun*.^[9] But before the appearance of *Raisin*, black playwright Louis Peterson had prepared theater audiences and the film industry for the dramatization of an aspiring black family who was striving to define their sense of black selfhood.

TAKE A GIANT STEP

Louis Peterson's TAKE A GIANT STEP (United Artists, 1959) is an example of the black family film that was written by a black but was produced by a mini-major studio. Forty years after Oscar Micheaux adapted his novel *The Homesteader* for the screen in 1919, black dramatist Louis Peterson (with white Julius L. Epstein) adapted his 1953 Broadway play for the screen. Julius J. Epstein, a former Warner Brothers contract writer, was co-scenarist with Peterson and co-produced the screenplay. Epstein was a prestigious Hollywood writer who had received an Academy Award (with his brother Philip and Howard Koch) for writing the Best Screenplay, in 1942, *Casablanca* (Warner).

The independent producing company of Hecht-Hill-Lancaster financed the production of TAKE A GIANT STEP. Organized in 1947 by Burt Lancaster and producer Harold Hecht, the company gained Hollywood's attention in 1955 with MARTY (United Artists), Paddy Chayefsky's screen adaptation of his play which had first appeared on a television program in 1953. The film won the Academy's Best Picture Award, Best Director Award (Delbert Mann), Best Actor Award (Ernest Borgnine), and Best Screenplay Award (Paddy Chayefsky). Undoubtedly encouraged by the reputation of scenarist Epstein and the past productions of Hecht-Hill-Lancaster, United Artists agreed to release GIANT STEP.^[10]

Thus, GIANT STEP (Hecht-Hill-Lancaster, UA, 1959) was a cumulative result of several necessities of supply and demand:

1. the increasing popularity and mainstream critical acceptance of black literary works,
2. the low supply of film products and the high demand for novel "first-grade films,"^[11]
3. the independent producers who wished to fulfill this need (Hecht-Hill-Lancaster),
4. the minor Hollywood distributors (UA) who wished to supply the demands of first-run theaters, and
5. the first-run theaters whose white audiences had declined.^[12]

However, the film and its producer Julius Epstein experienced many of the formidable problems that black-oriented films, especially family films, would

encounter in the succeeding years. These problems can be summarized as the limitations placed on the construction of the African American subject's racial consciousness, his/her sexuality and expressive use of language that is deemed profane.

In *TAKE A GIANT STEP*, Johnny Nash, a popular rock-and-roll singer, portrayed Spencer Scott, a black teenager growing up in a Northern white community. The film addressed problems Spencer encounters in white society and with his father Lem Scott, who refuses to empathize with Spencer's frustrations, (Frederick O'Neal, a co-founder of the American Negro Theatre, played the father in the film as he had done on Broadway.) The main racial problem for Spencer comes from his white teacher's interpreting black slaves as "too lazy" to fight for their emancipation. Spencer refutes his teacher's interpretation and is expelled from school. When his father upholds the teacher's right, Spencer is left without a parental figure to support him. It would seem that the film passively complied with the familiar aspects of the adolescent-parental-conflict subgenre of the family film. Spencer's heroism was at least one Afrocentric element that the film does not avoid regardless of the father's attitude toward the ignorant white teacher.[13] The film does not depict Spencer as a Coon nor a Tom, yet he must subordinate himself. His sublimation occurs after he has defied a white authority figure. Spencer does not merely represent an individual black adolescent.

Whether the U.S. film industry was ready to approve of Spencer's profanity became a major problem which momentarily forestalled the distribution of the film (it was similar to the record industry's refusal to distribute a recent "2 Live Crew" album and the National Endowment for the Arts fellowship guidelines which censor "unacceptable" forms of creative expression). A *Variety* article, entitled "True-to-Life Cussing May Deny Seal for *TAKE A GIANT STEP*," reported that the film

"may be released sans [without] an MPAA Production Code seal, according to producer Harold Hecht, who presides [is the president of the] company."

The article went on to report that if the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) did not give *GIANT STEP* a Production Code seal, Hecht-Hill-Lancaster (H-H-L) would limit the movie's release to "adult showings in first run situations and not worry about the seal." Hecht stated that the

"subject matter is so frankly handled — and with dialog[ue] carrying such words as 'hell,' 'bastard,' and 'prostitute' — that it's extremely doubtful that official sanction will be forthcoming." [14]

On 18 March 1959, United Artists had not agreed to distribute the H-H-L production; however, UA's non-exclusive releasing pact with Hecht's company suggested that there was a possibility that UA would release *GIANT STEP*.

In addition to the Hecht-Hill-Lancaster and United Artists non-exclusive releasing pact, Hecht believed that the Broadway opening of *A Raisin in the Sun* (11 March 1959) would "spark interest in *GIANT STEP*." Hecht's belief, perhaps, reflected his hope to recoup the film's estimated \$300,000 production cost but this merely suggests one effect that *Raisin* had on Hecht's hopes for *GIANT STEP*.

Raisin's Broadway success had little effect on UA's promotion and distribution of *GIANT STEP*. United Artists, after having contracted to release *GIANT STEP*, failed to adequately promote the film. Consequently, Julius J. Epstein, in a 1960 *Variety* article, accused UA of insufficiently promoting his film. Epstein believed UA shelved *GIANT STEP* even though the film had been well received by *Saturday Review of Literature* and *Newsweek* critics.[15] Epstein added,

"United Artists is having no part of racial problem pictures...and *TAKE A GIANT STEP* is simply going to keep gathering dust and anonymity."

In the same *Variety* article, Harry Handle], president of Western Pennsylvania Allied Theaters Association, interpreted the situation from an exhibitor's point of view. He

"protested strongly as to [Epstein's]...remarks, declaring them unfair to United Artists. He said the picture had bookings around the country to do business. He mentioned Detroit as one of the bigger cities where it did very little at the box-office."

Hendel's further comments indirectly alluded to the fact that the film industry's inaction in the creation of a sufficient stable of recognized black movie stars:

"He also said that the picture and some bookings in this area [Pittsburgh and Philadelphia] but people just weren't buying unknown Negro performers as serious actors. He mentioned Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier as being the only Negroes strong enough to carry a picture at the b.o.."

The absence of a youth-oriented black star may have been the result of the U.S. film industry's current promotion of the white rebellious youth while ignoring the equally rebellious black youths who refused second-class citizenship status as their racial heritage. While many actors and actresses like Marlon Brando, James Dean, Sal Mineo, Natalie Wood and Anne Francis appeared in such 50s pictures as *THE WILD ONE* (Columbia, 1953), *BLACKBOARD JUNGLE* (MGM, 1955) and *REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE* (Warner Brothers, 1955) and defined variations of the male and female type, African Americans were apparently limited to Sidney Poitier. Poitier was the adult-oriented star in *NO WAY OUT* (Fox, 1950) who also played a juvenile delinquent in *BLACKBOARD JUNGLE* (MGM, 1955).

During the same period, Harry Belafonte's sensuality both titillated and frightened his audiences. The industry, regardless of *ISLAND IN THE SUN's* (Fox, 1957) \$8 million grosses at a production cost of \$2,250,000, did not want a black Marlon Brando in 1957.[16] Robert H. Welker noted:

"...with *ISLAND IN THE SUN*... another giant step was taken — two interracial love affairs, frankly avowed, and including that ultimate trauma to many a white male psyche, a white woman in love with a colored man, and not merely ready but eager for his touch. Again, there were compromises: the unidentified British setting, the absence of full-blooded interracial kisses, the breakup of the colored man's affair through fear of prejudice." [17]

The importance of Welker's observation is to underline the limitations that the adult-oriented film posited on the black hero and white heroine in their dramatization of interracial intimacy. In recalling the fact that Oscar Micheaux had pioneered this effort in the early 20s, one can note the change in the dramatization of interracial intimacy in major-studio-produced films.

Hollywood also restricted the emergence of the youth and adult-oriented black protagonist because the U.S. film industry had not yet developed major black stars. During the 50s and early 60s, the black hero was limited to the contours of one actor — Sidney Poitier — who was forced to portray different roles, all of which rejected any interest in the opposite sex. One should understand that if Belafonte could not visually portray his sexuality in an adult oriented film like *ISLAND IN THE SUN*, then it would follow that Johnny Nash's portrayal of adolescent sexuality in the teen picture *GIANT STEP* would not be accepted, even if this love was directed at a black woman, since the mass audience could not accept black sexuality unless it was portrayed in a violent or primitive manner. Illustrating, the verbalized dramatization of alleged interracial rape as in the court proceedings of *SERGEANT RUTLEDGE* (Warner, 1960) and *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD* (Universal, 1962), or the visual depiction of sexual hedonism within a black community as in *CARMEN JONES* (20th Century-Fox, 1954) and *PORGY AND BESS* (Columbia, 1959) were the sole outlets for black sexuality during this period in U.S. film history.

At this cultural moment, there did not exist any civil construction of black sexuality in Hollywood. This absence resulted from the limiting conditions, as above-mentioned, which the film industry had restructured and, thereby, changed certain aspects of the African American experience as represented in U.S. films. There were other factors, too, which inhibited the cinematic portrayal of African American life. Film exhibitors felt that black-oriented films should be booked chiefly in black populated areas, Theater managers elsewhere feared that booking black-oriented films would attract blacks and scare away the theater's regular white audience. But the major problem that *GIANT STEP* faced was the heroic ambition of Spencer Scott, who defied the ignorance of a northern white teacher and explored his awakening sexual desires. While *GIANT STEP* may not have been an interesting film for a mass audience, it did give African American youth an image of a defiant black kid who refused his ignorant white teacher's attempt to dehumanize the African American community. In this sense, *GIANT STEP* is a great leap toward freeing black heroism from Hollywood's social and economic restrictions.

GIANT STEP preceded *A RAISIN IN THE SUN* by six years in its Broadway production and by two years as a Hollywood independent feature film. The two plays dramatized the growing black consciousness among the younger generation of educated, northern-born, black teenagers. The films also portrayed residential integration by middle-class black families. There exist in both films the memories of a southern past held, for example, by the maid Christine in *GIANT STEP* and Lena Younger in *RAISIN*. In their formal structure and depiction of a three-generation black urban family, the two plays and their film adaptations continued the modernist black-family melodrama as developed by Theodore Ward in *Big White Fog* (1938). Ward's play represented black life during the Depression era. The play raised issues pertinent to this period: poverty, unemployment, racial

discrimination and intra-racial rivalry between Marcus Garveyites and Communists, between black entrepreneurs and black laborers. It is important for any understanding of black-oriented film, to establish the dramatic sources and those issues in plays which Peterson and Hansberry undoubtedly read and were influenced by as they began writing, respectively, *GIANT STEP* and *RAISIN*.

The three plays and the two films exemplify a black literary movement in which pioneer writers struggled to develop their craft. They portrayed the psychology and sociology of black United States. These films illustrating the black family film genre also belong to this modernist movement. In the mid-Sixties, the Black Arts movement competed with this literary tradition (the modernist-integrationist text of Wards-Peterson-Hansberry) and established a black nationalist protest style epitomized by the dramas of LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) and the independent black films of the late 70s.[18] Thus, the film adaptations of *GIANT STEP* and *RAISIN* are profound reflections of African American modernist drama. *RAISIN*'s place in film history is unique in that it is the first major-studio financed film whose screenplay was written solely by a black woman. Perhaps, it is the first U.S. film to articulate a holistic sense of feminism which celebrates a race, class and gender solidarity.

A RAISIN IN THE SUN

One of the earliest major examples of a black family film, that was written by a black scenarist and independently produced for a major studio, is the David Susskind and Philip Rose Production of *A RAISIN IN THE SUN* (Columbia, 1961). The film was directed by Daniel Petrie, and Lorraine Hansberry adapted her original play for the screen.

David Susskind was interested in producing *RAISIN* because he had recognized that *Raisin* would be a financially and critically successful Broadway play. *Variety*'s coverage of the play's pre-Broadway tryouts was one way in which Susskind may have developed an interest in *Raisin*. On 28 January 1959, *Variety* reported,

"Whatever the theatre shortage in Gotham may be, there must be room for *A Raisin in the Sun*. Already of solid substance in tryout form, the Lorraine Hansberry drama is loaded with smash potentials that should ripen into substantial Broadway tenancy."

Variety also heralded the fact that the play was "written, directed and acted by Negroes (with only one white role in the cast)." This mode of production, which entailed black control over three major aspects of dramatic art, was adopted by a mainstream U.S. entertainment institution, Broadway. Later, Hollywood would adopt a similar mode of production and, thereby, rejuvenate the black commercial film movement within the dominant structure of Hollywood studios.

Yet, the content of *Raisin* seemed to be far different from the content of plays made by whites about blacks, and *Variety* hinted at this:

"*Raisin* stands out as a shining example of talent potential if given the opportunity. The play should draw comment not only for the quality of its presentation but also for the depth of its message."

On 11 March 1959 *Raisin* opened on Broadway and received rave reviews. Two days later, Susskind wrote to Sam Briskin, Columbia Pictures vice-president in charge of production, and expressed his interest in a screen adaptation of *Raisin*. Susskind wrote:

"I have an inside track on this property as a consequence of my relationship with the author and her attorney. I think if you were to manifest real interest I could be granted a pre-empt right on the play for motion pictures at the best price offered by any competitor. At this writing, United Artists, Harry Belafonte, Metro-GoldwynMayer, Paramount, Fox, Halt-Bartlett and the Mirisch Brothers have expressed strong interest in purchasing the play)."[19]

At this early date, at least six major film producers were interested in a screen adaptation of the play. Susskind, writing in the same letter, recognized that the play presented "a warm, frequently amusing and profoundly moving story of Negro life in which, for once, the race issue is not paramount." He reassured Columbia v.p. Briskin that a film version which featured Sidney Poitier would attract an audience: "After THE DEFIANT ONES and the upcoming PORGY & BESS [Columbia, 1959], Sidney Poitier would be an important box office element."

By the 16th of March, Sam Briskin responded to Susskind's query stating that

"we [Columbia] have had this interest..since we first learned of the play and its pre-New York openings ..we have been approached by others both in and out of the studio."[20]

While Briskin's letter offered no response to Susskind's query, *Variety* reported on 1 April, 1959, that Columbia Pictures in association with David Susskind and Philip Rose had acquired the film rights to *Raisin* for \$300,000. Susskind formulated the pre-production package which had been accepted by the studio. The package included himself and Philip Rose as co-producers. Hansberry as scenarist, Folder as featured star, and co-stars Claudia McNeil, Ruby Dee and Diana Sands. All that was left to negotiate was a director for the proposed film.

Martin Baum, the agent for RAISIN's black stage director Lloyd Richards and actor Sidney Poitier, initially suggested that Richards direct the film version. Columbia's vice-president of publicity and advertising Paul Lazarus discussed this possibility with Briskin, who inquired about Richards's CBS-TV videotape production of RAISIN. In a letter to Lazarus, Briskin reported that "when it got down to the last couple of days of rehearsal and the cameras were placed on the act he [Richards] seemed lost and CBS had to throw in a TV director to help him." [21] Thus, Columbia refused to give Lloyd Richards an opportunity to direct the film adaptation of the Broadway play which he now directed. Columbia studio executives were both cautious and backward. Columbia wanted to produce RAISIN because of its financial and critical success. Yet the studio executives did not want to make the same gamble that Broadway had made with Richards, one of the first blacks to direct a Broadway play. RAISIN finally received a director when Columbia executives approved Susskind's three picture contract with director Daniel Petrie (*Variety*, 20 July 1960).[22] Petrie had made one film THE BRAMBLE BUSH (Warner Bros. 1960), and this made him safe according to Columbia's standards.

While Columbia executives rejected Lloyd Richards as the director, they accepted Lorraine Hansberry as the scenarist. The initial reason that Columbia accepted Hansberry was RAISIN's status as a very hot property. The play's financial success gave Hansberry some leverage with Columbia's production chief, Sam Briskin. However, Briskin would not allow Hansberry any changes or additions to the screenplay which might threaten a mass audience. For example, Hansberry's first draft of the screenplay included Travis Younger having to bring 50 cents to school for special books about African Americans. The Columbia production executives Sam Briskin and Arthur Kramer and story editors William Fadiman and James Crow "agreed that this should be deleted from the screenplay," because it was not in the play. In addition, the Columbia production team "agreed that the addition of race issue material...should be avoided," because

"the introduction of further race issues may lessen the sympathy of the audience, give the effect of propagandistic writing, and so weaken the story, not only as dramatic entertainment, but as propaganda too." [23]

The production team also recommended that Beneatha's comment that "all Africans are revolutionaries today" be eliminated. They considered this as an example of "surplus in the race issue category and potentially troublesome to no purpose." They also argued that "Beneatha's dialogue about Africans needing salvation from the British and French could give the picture needless trouble abroad." [24]

The above suggested deletions are examples of the forms of censorship which occur in Hollywood-produced and distributed black commercial films. Since Hollywood films are produced for international markets and most black commercial films tend to include social criticisms, most studios usually tone down criticism of their potential clients. In RAISIN's case, Columbia story editors and executives were quick to reject Beneatha Younger's Pan-African consciousness because their audience was not going to be limited to black Pan-Africanists. And white liberals like David Susskind and Philip Rose. Columbia's intended audience for RAISIN included British and French colonialist sympathizers, and Columbia's recommended deletions recognized their presence

The audience for whom a black-oriented film is made, though sometimes conjectural or abstract, does determine film content and form and thus affect black culture as represented in the film. When RAISIN or another family film is created, one must identify the studio's estimation of an "intended audience" and, therefore, describe and interpret Hollywood ideology. In the above instance, Columbia's media executives suggested three deletions in RAISIN's sociopolitical and cultural elements. The power to delete certain ideological expressions of black culture highlights the limitations of Hollywood productions for black scenarists and/or black directors who became involved in black commercial cinema. Film theoretician Gladstone Yearwood writes,

"If the practice [which I call the mode of production] of black cinema is derived from that of Hollywood, then it will serve to reproduce the unequal relations characteristic of blacks in society." [25]

However, when black artists are involved in the mode of production as writers and

directors, then these films become not merely Hollywood films. The presence of blacks in positions of power forces the critic to reconceptualize terms and elaborate new definitions. This reconceptualization process involves defining variables of image control (as in Beneatha's Pan-African remarks which were not cut) and determining the studio's actual exercised power. I use the terms "colonized" to describe major studio productions, like King Vidor's HALLELUJAH (MGM, 1929), which are written or solely directed by whites. In addition, I use the term "neocolonized" to refer to major studio productions, like GIANT STEP and RAISIN, which are either written and or directed by black people. These two categories distinguish two forms of black-oriented major studio productions.

The critical success of the film adaptation of RAISIN is supported by the letters that Susskind received from people in the film and television industries. NBC Special Projects producer-director Robert K. Sharpe wrote,

"Perhaps more in this industry than any other we are judged by what we do when we have the opportunity to do it. In RAISIN IN THE SUN I feel not only have you been loyal to a property which could have been changed in so many ways for expediency, but you and your associates have produced an even more immediate and compelling piece than the play itself. It is indeed a credit to the movie industry and certainly will be to this country overseas."[26]

This congratulatory letter conveys the prestige value RAISIN had for its studio and the United States. However, the owner of William Goldman Theaters expressed an important reservation when he thanked Susskind:

"We are presently in consultation with Columbia as to the best approach ad-wise in order to garner the greatest possible return at the box office, I am sure you realize that the picture does present a problem from a selling standpoint due to its subject matter. It is imperative that we reach a mass rather than just a class audience."[27]

One way in which Columbia attempted to solve this problem as well as exploit what Robert Sharpe had discerned as "a credit to the movie industry," involved promoting RAISIN as a prestige picture. Columbia made RAISIN a United States entry in the 1961 Cannes Film Festival. Thereby, the film acquired additional international prestige, which was increased when the festival gave RAISIN a special award. In addition, the Screenwriters Guild nominated it for Best Screenplay of the Year Award that same year. This award and nomination helped increase Hollywood's acceptance of black writers and the black family film genre.

On January 10, 1962, *Variety* reported that RAISIN's domestic rentals amounted to \$1,100,000.[28] *Variety*'s estimated domestic rentals for RAISIN nearly equaled Columbia Pictures \$1,500,000 production costs as reported by *Ebony* magazine. [29] RAISIN was neither a financial disaster nor a box-office success. RAISIN offered film studios proof that a low-budget, skillfully written black scenario about a black family that features well-known black performers can accrue prestige as well as return a moderate amount of money to its distributor.

The effect the film had on its audiences and film critics, however, did not equal the play's critical acclaim and popularity among both black and white theater

audiences. One might interpret this imbalance as resulting from the different expectations that exist between theater and film audiences. Because major film productions like *RAISIN* require mainstream audience approval, while theater productions like *Raisin* can attract an interracial theater audience and still focus on topics which would offend moviegoers. Thus, it is understandable that the film had little effect on mainstream film audiences.

But *RAISIN*'s failure among mainstream film audiences cannot explain why critics and scholars have ignored the historical importance that this film has to the women's studies as well as the progressive movement in U.S. film. This article cannot single-handedly remedy the present limitations of U.S. film scholarship and its continued neglect of serious critical attention to African American film — with the exception of the black male filmmakers who dominate most film scholarship's past and present fixation on black film. Shall we remain clinging to the name of the fathers and thereby ignore the mothers, like Hansberry?

NOTES

1. Michael Conant, "The Impact of the Paramount Decrees," in *The American Film Industry*, ed. Tino Balio (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), p. 349.
2. Conant, p. 349.
3. Conant, p. 349.
4. Conant, p. 351.
5. Richard S. Randall. "Censorship: From *The Miracle* to *Deep Throat*," in *The American Film Industry*, p. 135.
6. Godfrey Hodgson, *America in Our Time* (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 51.
7. Dowdy, p. 72.
8. Andrew Dowdy. *The Films of the Fifties: The American State of Mind* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1973), p. 90,
9. Genevieve Faber, *Drumbeats, Masks, and Metaphor: Contemporary Afro-American Theatre* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983). p. 13.
10. Tino Balio, "Sars in Business: The Founding of United Artists," in *The American Film Industry*, p. 149:

"United Artists was formed on February 5, 1919, as a distribution company to promote, exploit, and market motion pictures...A key feature of the distribution contracts stipulated that each picture was to be sold and promoted individually. Block booking was out. In no way could one United Artists release be used to influence the sale of another UA picture."

11. In "The Impact of the Paramount Decrees" Conant writes.

"The anti-trust prohibition on all block booking in 1946 gave three minor distributors equal access with the five majors to nonaffiliated theaters. The decline in total picture output meant that even the affiliated theaters needed more first-grade films than the five majors could supply. These three minor distributors, a large part of whose films were relegated to the bottom half of a double feature program before 1946, found themselves able to bid for screen time in first-run theaters as equal of the five majors. United Artists was able to induce many of the new independent producers to distribute through it after it secured open competitive access to the first-run screens of former affiliated theaters." (359)

12. Garth Jowett, *Film, The Democratic Art* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976), p. 338:

"After...1946 when close to 1.7 billion dollars was paid by movie patrons to see their favorite entertainment, the fortunes of the U.S. motion picture went steadily downhill, with only the odd year in which the decline has been momentarily halted. In the fourteen year period between 1946 and 1960, the average weekly attendance dropped from ninety million to forty million. More important, the expenditures declined even more sharply, from one fifth to less than one-tenth of the available recreational dollars."

This is especially true of the 1956 and 1957 decline, which was the result of the release of pre-1948 Hollywood features to television. Also see Conant, pp. 361-362,

13. Barbara I. Molette, "Black Heroes and Afrocentric Values in Theatre," *Journal of Black Studies* 15.4 (June, 1985), p. 456:

"A recurring phenomenon among Black people in the United States had generated a type of Black hero in theatre and art forms. This Black hero is an individual who has faced U.S. racism and sometimes without apparent overt provocation...gets tired of the racism. A decision is made and a stand is taken."

14. *Variety*, 18 March 1959, p.3.

15. *Variety*, 27 April 1960, p. 15. Also see *Filmfacts* 3 (6 Jan. 1961), pp. 331-312. These pages give a synopsis of GIANT STEP, production notes and reviews from *Saturday Review* and *Variety*. Arthur Knight writing for the *Saturday Review* wrote,

"No film to date — not even THE DEFIANT ONES, UA, 1958] — has attempted to describe so explicitly what it means to be a Negro in a white man's world The Scotts are neither poor, nor ignorant, nor exploited, nor am they subjected to any virulent, Faubus-like white supremacy. They live in the north, where prejudice is of a subtler, more corrosive kind."

16. Mel Gussow, Darryl F. Zanuck *Don't Say Yes Until I Finish Talking* (New York: DaCapo Press, 1980), p. 191; also see Cobbett Steinberg, *Reel Facts: The Movie Book of Records* (New York: Vintage Books. 1982). p. 22.
17. Robert H. Welker, "New Image of American Blacks," *Variety*, 1 Feb. 1961, pp. 7,19.
18. Darwin T. Turner, "Dramas of Black Life from 1953-1970," *Iowa Review* VI. 2 (Spring, 1975), pp. 82-99. Also see Clyde Taylor, "Black Films in Search of a Home," *Freedomways* 23.4 (1983), pp. 226-233.
19. David Susskind, Letter to Sam Briskin, 13 March 1959. This and all letters cited are in the David Susskind Papers. Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.
20. Sam Briskin, Letter to David Susskind, 16 March 1959.
21. Sam Briskin, Letter to Paul Lazarus, 5 November 1959.
22. Harold Stem, Letter to Bernard Binibaum, 1 June 1960. This letter is from Petrie's attorney to Columbia Pictures' assistant treasurer-secretary Birmbaum.
23. Arthur Kramer, letter to David Susskind, 30 December 1959.
24. It should be noted that Africa, during the late 1950s and well into 1960, was witnessing the Mau Mau liberation movement against British colonialist in Kenya, the Algerian liberation movement against its French colonialists, and civil unrest in the Belgium Congo.
25. Gladstone L. Yearwood, "Toward a Theory of a Black Cinema Aesthetic," in *Black Cinema Aesthetics*, ed. Gladstone L. Yearwood (Athens, Ohio: Center for Afro-American Studies, Ohio Univ., 1982), p. 71.
26. Robert K. Sharpe, Letter to David Susskind, 21 March 1961.
27. William Goldnian, Letter to David Susskind, 3 April 1961.
28. *Variety*, "1961: Rentals and Potentials," 10 Jan. 1962, p. 58.
29. In "A RAISIN INTHE SUN," *Ebony*, April, 1961: "...with all obstacles overcome and the movie an accomplished fact, Columbia is eagerly awaiting the day when it can recoup its \$1.5 million investment," p. 53.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Interview with Dr. Roland Jefferson, producer Give something back

by Elizabeth Jackson

from *Jump Cut*, no. 36, May 1991, pp. 89-93, 46

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Dr. Roland Jefferson is a Los Angeles based psychiatrist turned film producer. Initially enthralled with the world of writing and storytelling, Jefferson diverted his attention to medicine when his family urged him to take the more traditional and "safe" career route. He received a B.A. from USC and his M.D. from Howard University in Washington DC. After years in private practice, he eventually succumbed to his first love. Jefferson has independently produced three films — WHACK ATTACK (1979), a story of drug usage and its devastating effects on the community; DISCO 9,000 (1977), centered on the popular, Hollywood-based disco and its mysterious underworld connections; and PERFUME (1989), his feature drama about an elitist group of black women who own the nation's leading perfume company. Jefferson says that aside from his contributions in medicine, he wishes "to give back in terms of artistic vision, something that people in our community would enjoy and feel proud of."

Elizabeth Jackson: Dr. Jefferson, you are both a psychiatrist and a full-scale film producer. Isn't that a rather unusual career mix?

Roland Jefferson: I'm not the first one who has tried this. THE ROAD WARRIOR and THE WITCHES OF EASTWICK were both produced and directed by physicians, the latter by George Miller, an ophthalmologist. I'd love to get into film full time, but I think I'd always keep a day or two open to see clients. If I'd known that this is what I wanted to do, I'd never have studied medicine.

I'd always wanted to write short stories but couldn't get any kind of encouragement from anyone. As I look back on the kinds of things I did as a youth, they were all leading to that — it just wasn't recognized as such. To tell the truth, had I known then what I know now, I'd have picked filmmaking over medicine any day of the week. I'll know when PERFUME comes out whether my background in psychiatry has helped me any.

PERFUME is really geared for black women — specifically for this target audience. It may also have a large an house market to white women, because it deals with women's issues. For example, one woman gets her children taken away by the

authorities for no valid reason. I don't think you have to be black to identify with this. Also any woman can identify with a love affair gone wrong, a lover who's jilted her, or the death of a husband. So I think *PERFUME* may have an appeal beyond its target audience.

As a writer and psychiatrist, I tried to inject as much broad characterization as I could. I have been working on this film for almost eleven years — this one project, trying to get it together. I've rewritten the script several times trying to get the characters to ring true. I had a number of offers to sell the script, but I held onto it because I had the desire to produce it myself. Now, after nearly a decade, it'll be released soon.

TELL ME ABOUT *PERFUME*.

PERFUME is purely a relationship drama. Its not made to be anything else. It deals with the interpersonal relations between five middle-class, relatively affluent black women. In terms of something more viewers would be familiar with, it's like *STEEL MAGNOLIAS* with less humor. It's from the Tick's Black Women Series, which takes a issues about black women seriously.

The women have been friends since they were children. Some are married, some divorced, some widowed. They're independent, in a range between relatively affluent and extremely wealthy.

It is a romantic drama, rated "R" with no violence. I was criticized by all the major studios when they viewed the final cut because it didn't have any violence, shoot-outs, or car chases. It was as if, "Why would anybody want to see a film that didn't have any of that?" It's as if we're pre-computed to watch only certain kind of films.

The women have five distinctly different personalities. One is a feminist, another a neurotic, another an alcoholic. Another is a lonely, needy woman, and another promiscuous. The film's theme is that diverse individuals who have different views and different values can be friends and come to accept one another in spite of their flaws. This film isn't any different from what Woody Allen makes except it doesn't have a cast of box office names, (I think there will be one when the film comes out.) We used talented unknowns with a good male supporting cast. They included Ted Large, from *LOVE BOAT*; Felton Perry, from *ROBOCOP*; Don Wilson, from *IRONSIDE*; and a couple of unknown actors, J.D. Hall, Cal Wilson, Melvin Howard Taylor. Because it deals with relationships, it shows the way these women relate to their men.

A white audience will not understand this, but a black audience will. The way relations happen demonstrates enormous depth and feeling in a way we've never seen before. Probably only *SOUNDER*, years ago, indicated that tenderness and warmth that you don't normally see. I don't want to give too much of the story away, but this film has something for everyone. Somebody once asked me, "Did I speak for all black women?" That's absurd. Of course I don't. But this film shows black women as how they may choose to become.

I strongly suspected, and this has been proven in test screenings held around the country, that some characters would be liked and others not. That's OK. That's what film is about. Surprisingly at a screening in Washington D.C., the audience

liked one of the characters that test audiences had not particularly liked. It really depends upon where a viewer's head is at. Some audiences, for example, don't like the character who's a feminist, but other audiences do. Some audiences do not like the one who's an alcoholic or one or two of the male characters. Yet other predominantly female audiences fell in love with some of the male characters. It just depends on who sees it.

You mentioned that this film was targeted for black women. As a black producer, do you feel a responsibility for producing for, or otherwise serving the black community?

We have to do that. I am a product of the community, so I feel a moral obligation to give something back. I can't finance the world, and I can't stop poverty. But what I can do hopefully is to give back in terms of artistic vision something that people in our community would enjoy and feel proud of.

You purposely set out to make this feature film with a black audience in mind. Was this a financially feasible move on your part? Is there money to be made with this kind of exclusive audience?

There is a huge market for films for and about the black community. For a long time the studios, to avoid making films about the black experience, used the failure of *THE WIZ* with Diana Ross. But that film made \$10-15 million, and it was only seen by mostly black people. It had little or no white crossover at all, and it cost \$30 million to make. A healthy strategy when making black films is to always keep the cost under \$3 million. That way, when you recoup \$12 million (if it shows to an exclusive all-black audience) you've made money.

A good example is *THE DISORDERLIES*, which had no white or black appeal; it had no audience appeal. Michael Schultz directed it. This film went off the charts at about \$9 million. Warner Brothers produced it, probably because they thought that the Fat Boys (the funniest thing in *CRUSH GROOVE*) would be able to capture the audience. As it turned out, that didn't happen, and the project lost money.

I don't mean to criticize Michael Schultz because lots of good directors direct films but, for some odd reason, the audience doesn't catch on. Even for Spike Lee — his films were done for under ten million dollars. He can go up to eight because he has distribution. That's the key. He can show his film in 1,000 to 1,500 theatres. Obviously, the lower the budget, the greater the chance of recouping finances. But films are all relative. *DO THE RIGHT THING* made \$25 million on an \$8 or \$9 million budget — whatever they gave Spike.

Spike Lee is absolutely correct in saying that this film would have grossed double had not the media distorted the threat of race riots in the theatres, so that many white viewers stayed away. It's an example of how inappropriately bad press destroyed a film. It could have earned \$50 million. I think Universal and Spike would agree with me on that.

On the other hand, look at Prince's latest film, *GRAFFITI BRIDGE*. Now my understanding is — and I can't verify this — that the film cost probably \$7 million to make. It only made about \$4 million in the box office, and it had a big

distributor behind it. It shows how even well done films with big-name stars and seemingly commercial appeal sometimes fall flat. Sometimes cost isn't always a factor, though the lower the budget, the greater the chances are of enhancing a financial return. It would have been very interesting to the scene if, let's say, Universal Studios had picked up Spike's first movie, which he made for \$179,000. If they'd opened that on a three, or four, or five million dollar advertising budget, it would've been very interesting to see the return on that.

I know this was a lengthy film from conception through completion. Any particular problems you encountered that other black producers could benefit from?

My number one problem was not enough money. The second problem I can see in hindsight. To any black filmmaker I say, know who you are hiring. Unfortunately I allowed somebody else to hire a good part of the crew because I trusted that person's judgment — not realizing that that person was an opportunist and using the film for his own needs. So a lot of the crew were not qualified to work on the film, even though many were extremely qualified. What I know now about producing that I didn't then was to go through each resume page by page personally. But the second thing which proved even more disastrous was to have cast members and/or crew members who don't see the film the way you do. Get rid of them immediately or it will cause all kinds of problems down the road. To indicate what happened, someone called a major distributor claiming that they owned the film — owned all the distribution rights — but he was nothing but a paid technician. The studio sent me the letter, which I still have. That's how arrogant and opportunistic people are. Unfortunately, he's a black. That's what makes it really bad.

Black producers want to use black talent. There's an enormous amount of black talent out there, both in front of and behind the camera. But some you really have to watch out for. I say that without any problem. If there are any lessons to be learned, it is know who you are hiring and make sure they see the film the way you do. If they don't, get rid of them. I don't care if they are black or white. The best film in the world will be about the making of *PERFUME*, an unqualified hit. It was a nightmare. But we all learn, and the mistakes I made on that I will never repeat in life.

Who is the distributor?

An east coast company called Video Pick-Wheeler Films.

What would you like to brag about with *Perfume*?

It has an excellent music track by Willie Hutch, who comes out of the Motown stable and did a number of very commercial films during the 70s. So he did the music track on this film with some new vocal artists — Marci Thomas and Alice Adams. The sound track plays a very integral role. As the music director came up to me and said, "This is a film for black women in love." In all the previews, audiences may not like certain characters, which is fine, but the film works on them unconsciously. Several different women viewers asked in several different parts of the country where they could find women like that. We did something right.

So you are saying that in producing a black film, one must really consider ways of keeping costs down?

Exactly, especially if you don't really care if anyone else sees your project. A film has to make two and a half times its cost to make a profit, so if you spend \$3 million on a film, \$3 million must also be spent on advertising. Before this film ever opens in the theatre, you are now \$6 million in debt — so now the picture has to earn that \$6 million dollars back. You'll begin to see some profit at about \$15 million.

One cannot spend \$30 million dollars on a black film. As producer you need to be very realistic. Let's assume that you have an all-black film that has no appeal to white audiences, but it has enough of an appeal that you could draw an exclusive black audience. Assuming that your black audience would only come to see it one time, realistically your film would be able to make maybe \$10-12 million tops, and many studios know that. Films like *THE LAST DRAGON*, produced by Motown, made \$25 million, and that was because there was a lot of repeat business. By the way, that project went way over budget and should have made more.

When *PURPLE RAIN* was initially filmed, the producers knew they were going to make their money back just on the black audience because Prince had a big name. They had no idea initially that he had that much white crossover appeal. It pulled \$75 million, and probably half of that came from white audiences. But much of the money came from repeaters — those that had seen the film more than once, and probably more than twice (more like four or five times, it was on the verge of becoming a cult film).

Now *PURPLE RAIN* was marketed as a rock film, when in reality it was a black film. If you stripped away all the music, it was a story about a brother and what happened to him in relation to his world — and to the other brothers [Black men] around him. The film was about black lifestyle. On the other hand, his second film died before it got out the box office [*UNDER THE CHERRY MOON*]. People wanted to hear Prince sing. They did not necessarily want to see him act.

THE COTTON CLUB was a \$50 million film. It would have to have made \$150 million to make profit, but it only made \$20 million. The mistake that they made was to spend \$50 million on it in the first place. They should have made it an all-black film that was in fact *about* the Cotton Club [emphasis his], instead of about some of the white characters that surrounded it. If they had done it as an all black project — and made it for about \$2 million — they would have made a fortune.

On the other hand, if *THE COLOR PURPLE* had been made by Gordon Parks, it would not have made anywhere close to what Spielberg had drawn. It could have been the same, identical film, with the same cast, the same cinematography. But of course Spielberg drew in the white audience, so the film got an automatic crossover.

So strategies in marketing films are ticklish. *THE STING*, with Robert Redford, was initially an all black project that Sidney Poitier and Richard Pryor were to be part of. At the last minute, before they were to start shooting, they decided to whiten the cast and make it a "white" film. It would have been commercial with Poitier and Pryor, but they felt they could make it even more commercial with Redford — so Redford it became.

Were you able to use this financial formula to turn profit on your first two feature

films, *Whack Attack* and *Disco 9,000*?

I was able to recoup monies and turn profit on WHACK ATTACK, which had an exclusive all black audience. This film was financed by the networks and by private individuals.

You say yourself that your films are made for predominantly black audiences. Does this mean that your financiers are predominantly the black middle class?

Unfortunately, no. I believe that if one tenth of 1% of the black middle class suddenly made its resources available, in 24 hours we could turn around the face of black America in film and television. But the middle class has detached itself morally and ethically from the underclass and sees no real need to subsidize the arts.

In fact, their attitude is that they would rather pay taxes than deal with artists that wish to do anything on stage, TV or film. This is really a matter of philosophy and personal commitment. If you talk with a number of independent black producers you'll hear the same thing. I mean, I have talked with black people who could put up the money from just the interest earned from their certificates of deposits and not even feel it. They will sit across from you, tell you how much money they have, how many franchises they own, and they won't give you ten cents. Yet, in the same breath, they will tell you how much money they lost at the gambling tables in Las Vegas. So this issue is really one of moral bankruptcy.

My philosophy has always been, give us the money that you we going to lose or have to pay taxes on. I don't want to change your lifestyle — just give us money you have to pay or play away. But you would be surprised how difficult that concept is to sell. Sometimes I think the hardest thing for a black man to become in the United States is enlightened. But again, I place the blame in the middle class black. We, and we alone, are in a position to turn our images around, and quickly. If that were the case, if those of us that could would invest, there would be scores of good films coming out annually, scores of plays — there wouldn't be enough good TV stations to hold that many programs.

I was at a seminar that Robert Townsend and Keenan Ivory Wayans [co-executive producers of HOLLYWOOD SHUFFLE] gave. They told a story about a recent black millionaire who was so bitter about the time and effort it took him to become rich that he vowed never to help another black acquire money. His struggling brothers would have to pay their own dues, just as he had. And I've heard this philosophy espoused from wealthy blacks — people who have so much money they couldn't spend it in their lifetimes or their grandchildren's lifetimes. It's basically moral bankruptcy. That is what Townsend was running up against. The thing that gets me particularly angry is that these are the same people who criticize the images on TV and film.

Assuming that more blacks take on the task of producing film at some point, will their participation alter the presentation of on-screen images regarding the minority character?

Yes, if the producer is so inclined. But many black producers are as biased and greedy as any other producer, and they will not hesitate to exploit a particular

audience for financial gain.

Certain filmmakers have a sense of ethical, moral and social responsibility to make films which have intensity and depth and a great deal of thought behind them. Some don't. Unfortunately, the black filmmakers who make the kinds of films which'd really enhance the image of blacks in this country are the directors who are obscure because their films don't have distribution.

A classic example of that is what Charles Burnett has said about how *TO SLEEP WITH ANGER* has been distributed. Here's a film that'd simply alter the perception of black images. Yet it's had basically lukewarm distribution, even though it's carried by a major distributor. I'm quite certain that would not happen with the film called *HOUSE PARTY*. I'm not denigrating *HOUSE PARTY* nor am I denigrating the other brothers — they're very good filmmakers. But *TO SLEEP WITH ANGER* is a film that people actually have to think about.

My real gripe is that so with many films, people get spoon-fed. When they go the theatre, they don't have to think, so the brain isn't exercised. Filmmakers like Haile Gerima, who made *BUSH MAMA*, and a number of others remain obscure because their films are thought-provoking and have a real sense of commitment. These films cannot find their way into the market, which is controlled by the major distributors.

Is there a common philosophy peculiar to the black producers you know?

The single most difficult task facing black producers is raising money. Unfortunately, raising money for a film targeted at a black audience presents enormous problems. One, money sources view films strictly as an investment. That's important to understand. Because they view it as an investment, they don't care about social responsibility or image or process. They want their money back. That's the bottom line. And that means that the filmmaker has to make a decision. "Do I compromise my script because this particular investor is going to give me a million dollars and wants a lot of sex and violence? Or, do I walk away from this investor, keep my script intact and spend another twenty years trying to get them to do it the way I want?" That may become a philosophy. Some black filmmakers have fallen into that category.

Spike Lee said, get a film made by any means necessary. Some black filmmakers will say, "Get a film made at any cost, no matter what compromise you have to make." As a result, some filmmakers end up making junk, but they got a film made. You have to balance how important it is to get a film made. My own personal philosophy is, "Yes, you can get the film made, but if it's junk and nobody sees it, then you may as well have not made it all." The flip side of the coin is, "Now I've got a track record of having a project finished, even though nobody saw it. From a business standpoint, I got the film made." I think such a philosophy depends on one's own particular view of making films.

Yes. I hate to say this, but I think that most black producers are ultra-conservative. Dealing with some of them is almost like dealing with white people. Saying this does not make me very popular with them. While there may be an element of realistic understanding on their part, they are not inclined to take risks. You don't do a black version of *KRAMER VS KRAMER*, or *TERMS OF ENDEARMENT*. You

don't do films that are thought provoking, deep and require audiences to sit down and think. I think most black producers would shy away from that. Their basic philosophy is that if you program to and for the black audience, the show must be simplistic, have a great deal of music and dance, a lot of humor, and as little intellectual thought as possible. That seems to be the general working attitude among black producers today.

I don't entirely blame them for this. Some of their outlook is dictated by financial sources. Many black producers have adopted the attitude that if they want to do anything, then they have to do it the way the money sources dictate. That attitude has a certain degree of reality. If we were living in a country like France, a country that subsidizes film and does not involve itself in the kinds of artistic restrictions we've placed upon ourselves here, you would see a different kind of film attitude.

In creating product for the black community, is there more need to entertain or inform?

I think we need both. It would be myopic to force the two into a single entity. There's an audience for everything, for every kind of film and programming. An intellectual audience will only look at Public Television. A teenage audience will look at MTV and anything Michael Jackson does; another audience will look at serious drama. You have to fill one need at the exclusion of the other.

Many minority technicians are complaining that they are often not hired. But the folks in the industry who are hiring claim that there are no minority technicians to hire. What have you found to be the case?

All the films I produced have always had a preponderance of minority technicians. PERFUME, my latest film, had a 90% black crew. At least 50% of the technicians in WHACK ATTACK were Black. Minority technicians are not at all difficult to obtain. In fact, there is a directory of black technicians for the Hollywood area that Sandra Sharpe put together. People who say they cannot find anyone qualified are telling a lie.

Are there any final words of advice that you would care to lend to aspiring producers?

Whatever field you are interested in settling into as a producer — be it stage, radio, TV or feature film — you need to be intimately familiar with the necessary procedures and protocols. You also have to anticipate and expect difficulty. You will face much rejection, but it has to be so much a part of you that it ceases to be surprising or disappointing. If you let it get next to you, you will become despondent, lose faith, and burn out very easily. After that, people have a tendency to give up and to chuck the whole thing. So you have to be prepared to hang in and be tenacious, because success will not come easily.

You must also know how to seize opportunity when it is there, to recognize that you may be shooting for the stars, with a chance to hook onto the edge of the moon maybe. Use any kind of ingenious methodology you can come up with to get some money.

If there's not enough money, don't give upon the project. Figure out ways to make

the film or video with what you have. Figure out ways to borrow money or defer payments to participants — whatever way you can to complete your project. Too many people think that because their budget is \$10 million, they have to wait until they get \$10 million, when they may only get \$1 million total. You need to know how to do it for \$1 million.

Longevity is what will really pay off in the end. You can't give up on anything, because if you give up, there are 10,000 people waiting who won't give up. This business is very difficult to break into. It requires an enormous amount of patience and fortitude. If a person is hungry enough, and *really* wants to do it (emphasis his), then a way can be found. I think Robert Townsend had a stroke of genius. Using credit cards to finance HOLLYWOOD SHUFFLE was brilliant. If he were white, he'd be a studio executive now. They'd have offered him the job on the spot because that kind of ingenious inventiveness is so rare. Those are the kinds of people the studio would hire, but of course he is not white, so he is not going to be head of a studio. But that's the kind of ingenuity that makes film successes.

[To top](#) [Current issue](#) [Archived essays](#) [Jump Cut home](#)

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Barbara McCullough, independent filmmaker "Know how to do something different"

by Elizabeth Jackson

from *Jump Cut*, no. 36, May 1991, pp. 94-97

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Barbara McCullough's Filmography

Commercial Production:

- Production manager, unit manager producing special visual effects with Cine Motion Pictures.
- ZZ Top music video.
- CAPTAIN POWER AND THE SOLDIERS OF THE FUTURE, an animated, live-action cartoon with computer-generated imagery and miniature photography. Worked as unit manager.
- Production coordinator, special visual effects, Praxis.
- MADE IN HEAVEN, an Alan Rudolph film.
- 1988 on: Production Coordinator, National Productions for Public televisions KCET/channel 28 in Los Angeles.

Independent Production:

- SHOPPING BAG SPIRITS AND FREEWAY FETISHES: REFLECTIONS ON RITUAL SPACE, one hour, subjective/ semi experimental documentary on why artists incorporate ritual in their art. Budget \$2,500. Two years to complete. 1980. WATER RITUAL #1: AN URBAN RITE OF PURIFICATION, \$700. 1979. FRAGMENTS, compilation piece. 1980.
- WORLD SAXOPHONE QUARTET. 1980.

Elizabeth Jackson: How did you become interested in filmmaking?

Barbara McCullough: I became interested in filmmaking initially due to my love for photography. I wanted to be able to express myself creatively, but did not know how to do it. In the beginning I was drawn to dance. But I had to be realistic — I was already in college, with two children — I knew dancing would not be the real way I would be able to express myself.

I had an interest in history, in psychology, and in literature. I was fascinated with Zora Neale Hurston. I thought perhaps I would document history in the written forms, especially life in the south. Later I thought I would combine the written with

photography. That led to an interest in taking video classes. I wanted to be the Hurston of video.

My colleagues who shared these classes were really visually creative, and it pushed me to see what I could do. It made me look at things more deeply and in a more emotional way. That emotional expression later helped me to develop ideas filmically.

Your films are quite stylistic, offbeat at times. Will the types of films you produce in the future vary much from your past work?

Stylistically, I have my own personal style. I like things that are offbeat, unusual. At the same time I like my films to reflect the diversity of my background as a Black person as well as the different influences that affect me. When I do something, I am trying to show the universality of the Black experience. So even though I am dealing with something very offbeat and different, there is still a certain line of universality that runs through my work.

How have audiences responded to your independent productions in the past?

Some of the work I have done has been experimental. I do not intend this to be stuff for a broad audience. My viewers have to have an affinity for offbeat, unusual images and characters. Mine are projects that have a different type of orientation. My work is shown basically through the art community, video exhibits, things that are confined to a museum or gallery setting, or an art theatre type of presentation, rather than to a broad-based community-exposure type situation.

One of my pieces [SHOPPING BAD SPIRITS] starts off with how white critics deal with Black artists — so I don't have any illusions about who does or does not like my work. I have tried to present my work to people at KCET [PBS in Los Angeles], but they weren't interested.

If I can get my work around to festivals, and invited to speak about my work around the country, then that's what I want to do. Word of mouth helps show my films a lot, which is why they play a great deal during Black history month. I know realistically that I won't make a lot of money out of my films, but each project I do provides me with an opportunity. The more people who know about what I have done, the better it is, because it provides more of an opportunity. All of the showings lend to your legitimacy for future funding rounds. The programmers many times are on the boards that distribute funding, so I like that.

You speak of funding rounds, which I assume means that you deal with the grant givers. What has been your experience with that process?

I am convinced that it is really a very political process. In terms of anything being accepted, it's about who you know and who knows you. Who's in a position to turn a favor for you? Who knows your work and is willing to say, "Hey, we need to support this project"? Maybe a certain amount of people get through that maze and get funding, but it's more a question of who knows about you as opposed to your just coming into a situation and someone seeing your work for the very first time and accepting it,

Do Black independents share common philosophical bond regarding creating shows about Blacks?

The people that I know, the independents doing low budget projects, are very conscious about giving a positive, realistic portrayal of Black people and in turn giving something to the community. Because these filmmakers work on low budgets, because they are the ones raising the money, they have the opportunity to say what is and what is not. Because I raise my own money for my own projects, what I am doing has never gotten down to a philosophical point of view. Most of us are conscious of the fact that we have an obligation to show truth — to show Black people as they *are* [emphasis McCullough's] as opposed to who somebody else thinks we are.

I will never forget Stan Lathan's project on the James Baldwin work. I saw it on PBS and it was most worthy, outstanding. I don't see how anybody could have watched that program and not appreciate the honesty in it. And yet the Black community doesn't always know that these people [Black independents] exist. They [independents] get their opportunity sometimes by white people who see and accept their work. But the legitimacy does not always come from our own community.

Charles Barnett's films, Billy Woodbury's films [Black independents] are outstanding projects with a lot of heart. Very well written, very well received, very real characters. They can get to the heart of the story and bring out those real wonderful human elements. Their work is painful, joyous, touching. Julie Dash, *Carrot Parrot Blue* — they really do wonderful works. And people are impressed because of the authenticity of their pieces.

What, if any, responsibility do you feel when producing films for or about minority audiences?

Again, I feel that in anything I do I have to tell the truth about it. I have no right to employ the stereotypes that the majority media has employed. My whole thing is to dispel stereotypes. Whatever I am involved in, I have a duty to show the positive side so that I create a balanced picture of Black people.

For instance, if I show Voodoo in comparison to traditional religion, I have a responsibility to show a positive side of that [Voodoo] and not just deal with the negative. Every time you see something in the media — even though there is a lot of Voodoo practice that goes on in the world — it's such an injustice to show just the Black magic side [of the practice] as opposed to the white magic side. Yet anytime Voodoo or traditional religions are contrasted, it's always the hocus focus negativity. So again, I must show a balanced view about whoever we are as a people.

I am thinking about [producing] an upcoming project on developmentally handicapped people, and I may even choose to give an imbalance on the positive side, because we all know about the negative side of that world. We all have our own prejudices that we have to overcome to watch a program on people with disabilities. So why not give an imbalance on the positive side when there has been so much negative shown?

In the most recent years of your career, you have worked with the new special effects technology. Do you see these new areas as affording Blacks an increased exposure to this field?

Not necessarily, I'm sure they could care less. I mean whites are still doing the hiring. They are only interested in the interplay between Blacks and technology if a Black person came to apply for the job and demonstrated an extraordinary skill with that technology. They will be interested only if that person is an asset to them. But in terms of the technology itself making opportunities greater, I can't say that it will. Of course I believe that if Black folks have access to something and they have the opportunity to do well, they will do well. But, no, the technology will not work to offer more opportunity, because it's going to be a struggle for any Black person to get access to that anyway. There will only be one or two Blacks out there doing anything like that.

For example, in what I do (working in special visual effects production), there are very few Black people out there. I have been the only one whom I have come across in a management position in this area. I have met one Black woman who works with computer-operated cameras, and she is the only one I know of. She says herself that she needs to become better, and becoming better will mean having more opportunities to practice her craft. There must be other people out there, but she is the only one I've run across — and I'm the only one she's run across. That's it.

Your films serve to examine who blacks are as a culture and they incorporate both ritual and drama. Do the films you produce make a difference or impact on mainstream media?

There is no highly charged dramatic show on TV dealing with Blacks. This is because one would have to get into the sociology of the Black community, and that's something white folks are neither interested in, understand, nor want to deal with on prime time TV. To deal with us dramatically means we have to get into the politics of unemployment, of crime, which is the cause of homelessness, of hunger, and of Black on Black crime.

The point I'm making is, I don't think anybody is interested in having a real impactful Black show. It would expose what the real United States is about, give people here something to think about, so it would be labeled a "protest" show. Anything that legitimately shows our anger or our frustration is considered a "protest" show. And even if white America were able to sit and take it, the sponsors of the show don't want to be associated with the truth in that way. Sponsors don't have enough guts at this point in time to put themselves into position of supporting something like that.

Yet outside the limited, sometimes experimental works by Black independents, mainstream television is all we have. Do we as a Black audience watch that out of desperation?

Oh, yes. I think that's why shit shows like GOOD TIMES could do so well. I would sit and watch the show with my son, and although I didn't care for this show at all, there was something about the characters that reminded me of people that I have met, overheard or have experienced. I watched, even though the storyline of the show may have been something I did not agree with, there is something about the

characters that we can relate to.

So I can understand why Black people would watch a show that may not necessarily be the best show in the world in terms of the kinds of information it's giving out. We watch because there is a Black person on the screen, and we are hungry for images of ourselves. Most Black shows on television are successful because a lot of the people who watch TV are Black, and they will watch another Black person. And unless the show is just downright out and out poor, the show will be a success. And some of these programs are the worst. You get lulled into watching them because it becomes a habit. They become familiar, just like Muzak. But [viewing] just to see [emphasis McCullough's] another Black person is still something that audiences will do.

Should future programming for minority audiences be geared more towards information or entertainment?

People are not just going to sit around and watch something for its educational value. You can disseminate educational information in an entertaining way, and I think that's what it has to be from now on. It's going to be a mixture, and cannot survive without both elements.

In the old days of TV, people might have been able to sit and listen to talking heads, but those days are over. This U.S. audience is very sophisticated, and they expect sophisticated techniques to get the story told. That, in a way, is unfortunate. Because a lot of times independent producers who have a very difficult time raising money for their projects find it hard to put all of those advanced components into their low budget projects. Yet I think there are ways to get around that if you are very careful about how you approach it [production] and think it out. So it is possible to come across with something economical yet technically tight by using the best of what you have.

What advice would you give aspiring filmmakers?

This is a hard issue to deal with, because a lot of this is really very discouraging. At times I have wondered whether I should be doing this or doing something totally different.

I guess my advice to aspiring producers would be to be versatile, know how to do different things. Know as much as you can technically. Put yourself in a position to work with people so you can understand the process. Place yourself in a situation so that you will have enough information to enable you to be resilient. Resilience is the key to surviving in the midst of all of this.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The films of Isaac Julien Look back and talk black

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from *Jump Cut*, no. 36, May 1991, pp. 98-107, 10
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MODES OF APPROPRIATION

"All discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual. Representation is possible only because enunciation is always produced within codes which have a history, a position within the discursive formations of a particular space and time."

— Stuart Hall (1988:29)

Black British cinema comes out of a highly charged context. Intense black uprisings against police repression and rightwing groups in Britain throughout the 70s and into the 80s are the root and some of the subject matter of Isaac Julien's films. Coco Fusco has called the 1981 uprisings, "a watershed moment in the history of race relations" (1988:21/n.5). According to Paul Gilroy the suspicious deaths of 13 young blacks in 1981 set off a chain of events that led to explosive rioting in the area of Brixton, spread throughout industrial centers of London and "provided a means to galvanize blacks from all over the country into overt and organized political mobilization" (1988:102). Kobena Mercer has argued that, "the eruption of civil disorder, encoded militant demands for black representation within public institutions as a basic right (and)...many public institutions hurriedly redistribute(ed) funding to black projects" (1988a:6).

Isaac Julien was one of the filmmakers who benefited from the formation of the black film workshops that were one of the results of the 1981 uprisings. As young, black, working class filmmaker it is questionable whether he would have had access to such an expensive form of communication/ expression as film if Sankofa, the workshop he operates from, did not exist. Because black communities to a certain extent enabled black filmmaking in Britain, filmmakers have often been held accountable to them, though not always by the communities themselves.[1] [see [notes in new window](#)] Their task has been seen by some to speak to and for the black communities. Many filmmakers, however, claim only to be speaking *from* a black experience in Britain rather than *for* one (Julien and Mercer, 1988:4). However, questions of filmmakers' personal expression, when they have come up, have been deemed of secondary importance.[2]

One of the implications of such discourse is that black filmmakers must

communicate via a "language" which their constituencies can understand, i.e. that of dominant narrative forms. Yet, all of Julien's films eschew traditional film narrative. *TERRITORIES* (1984, 25 min.) is a short experimental documentary. Recurring, discontinuous images interact with an intoning voice over and various types of music to deconstruct, and find meaning in, Carnival and its context. *PASSION OF REMEMBRANCE* (co-directed with Maureen Blackwood, 1986, approx. 80 mm.) is a feature which goes against dominant forms. Characters appear out of the blue. The film relies on expressionistic devices such as the indication of an audience through aural, rather than visual means. Characters look into the camera and address the audience directly. Scenes such as that of the protagonist and her friends dancing do not contribute to plot development. And the main narrative is interpolated at various intervals with lengthy montage sequences. *THIS IS NOT AN AIDS ADVERTISEMENT* (1988, 13 min.) is a lyric experimental film. *LOOKING FOR LANGSTON* (1989, 40 min.), Julien's latest film, creates a non-linear narrative through the combination of archival footage, photographs, poetry, and re-enactments, to evoke the ambience, and some of the people, of the Harlem Renaissance.

Julien, along with the rest of Sankofa and the Black Audio Film Collective, has been criticized for his choice of film practices. For example, in "Two Kinds of Otherness: Black Film and the Avant-Garde," Judith Williamson obliquely pounces on this issue when she states, "Audiences do matter ...If you're practical you do want to reach people beyond your buddies" (111). The implication is that, because of their form, films like *HANDSWORTH SONGS*, *PASSION OF REMEMBRANCE*, and by extension, the rest of Julien's work, are not reaching audiences.[3] Williamson then juxtaposes these films with *MY BEAUTIFUL LAUNDRETTE*: "(Audiences) love it! ...It's been a highly enjoyed film" (111). She notes that one needs a certain amount of cultural capital in order to understand and enjoy "avant-garde films," a cultural capital that is presumably not readily available to the black films' "natural audience" — blacks.[4]

Williamson's piece raises several important issues. First of all, it illustrates the degree to which minority filmmakers are marginalized through a double bind of expectation/ obligation due to how little access blacks have to the means of production. As Sankofa member Martina Attille notes, "Sometimes we only get the one chance to make ourselves heard" (cited in Pines 1986:101).

Second, Williamson notes the hesitancy with which critics engage with black films. To these points we can add that these filmmakers are excluded from the mainstream, burdened with low budgets, accountable to communities, restricted to certain forms; and their films are often condemned to minimal distribution. Black filmmaking is marginalized from within by discourses of accusation/ prescription. It is marginalized from without by a racist, market-driven film establishment.

Black filmmakers, however, have good reason to reject traditional narrative. To begin with, mainstream forms are most palatable when accompanied by mainstream budgets. Julien's films, with the possible exception of *LOOKING FOR LANGSTON*, are made on budgets substantially below those of even British independent films like Stephen Frears' *LAUNDRETTE*, Derek Jarman's *CARAVAGGIO* or Terence Davies' *DISTANT VOICES/STILL LIVES*. [5] Moreover, if we agree with Stuart Hall that "all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and

all knowledge is contextual (p. 29)," then new discourses need a combination of new places, new positions, new situations, new contexts. If dominant cinema is characterized by depictions of blacks as Mammies, Toms, and Coons, and if that is the "knowledge" that that form/ context evokes, then perhaps it is not the best one to use. Likewise, following this line of reasoning, one can argue that other accepted forms of narrative have yet to represent black people as other than Other.

Salami Rushdie has written, "If you want to tell the untold stories, if you want to give voice to the voiceless, you've got to find a language." [6] This search for new "film languages is not just characteristic of fallen or other young, black, British filmmakers. Feminists have been experimenting with innovations with language since the 70s. In her now classic essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey argued that since classic Hollywood cinema condemned women to Otherness even as it created pleasure, this new feminist "language" should be one that creates unpleasure (1988:58-59). This is a strategy that Julien rejects.

His work, however, does reveal various attempts at experimenting with lyric as well as documentary and fictional narrative in order to make blacks, women, gays, and sometimes black women and black gays *enunciators* rather than mere *enoncés*. [7] I hesitate to use the term avant-garde to describe the work. *The Oxford Handy Dictionary* defines the term *avant-garde* as meaning "innovat(ions) in art, literature, etc." (p. 48), which I think fits it well. However, in film, the term has often been associated with difficult, often formalist, "apolitical" work such as that of Fernand Léger, Germaine Dulac, Michael Snow and Joyce Wieland. Julien's work is art cinema in the sense that he often does not incorporate a linear cause-effect relation between narrative events. Its use of montage and distancing may be considered formalist. In that it challenges dominant cinema in terms of both form and content, it is a counter cinema.

After seeing his work many times, I have come to suspect that new kinds of work demand new kinds of criticism. Julien admits to having been partially influenced by avant-garde work:

"There are some avant-garde filmmakers, such as Ken McMullen and Sally Potter, whose work I am interested in. But if I were going to cite direct influences, I would look to Haile Gerima and Charles Burnett" (quoted in Fusco 1988:31-32).

I am not familiar with the work of the latter two U.S. black filmmakers. This realization made me think that there is probably a whole culture of references in Julien's work that I and other white critics, don't understand. It also made me realize that we often resort to our already acquired frames of reference rather than expand and acquire new ones to deal with new work.

With these limitations in mind I will now attempt to look directly at the films. My purpose is not to provide a "comprehensive" critique. The films are of different lengths and in different modes, and they raise many questions that will not be dealt with in this piece. What the different works have in common is that they engage with representations of race, sexuality and nation and that they are either directed or co-directed by Isaac Julien. In the films, the otherwise marginal is made central. They make a subject of various forms of Otherness. It is these strategies of representation, and their manifestation, that are the object of my gaze and the

subject of this paper.

TERRITORIES

"We are struggling to begin a story," say different voices over throughout Isaac Julien's *TERRITORIES*, "a history, a her/story of cultural forms specific to black people." Sometimes this line will be repeated almost as a chant by a woman's voice, followed a few beats later by a male voice. At other times two women will say it in unison, followed again by a male voice.

The Notting Hill Carnival, a three-day event held annually in August since 1958, is the point of departure for the film's exploration of various contested territories. Carnival has been the site of various "race riots" beginning with the year of its inception. During the 70s riots erupted in 1976, 1977 and 1978 but it is the '76 one which is most famous. That year Scotland Yard out 1500 uniformed men to police Carnival. Such massive surveillance resulted in a riot in which black youth fought back and won. According to Paul Gilroy, the 1976 Notting Hill Carnival was "a watershed in the history of conflict between blacks and the police and in the growth of the authoritarian forms of state planning and intervention during the 1970s" (1987:93). Gilroy also writes that a concept of criminal public disorder is "central to today's racist ideology" (p. 82). The widespread media coverage of Carnival, when it did not equate blackness with exotic spectacle, equated it with crime. Both equations were widely disseminated, reinforced racist ideology and are sharply scrutinized in *TERRITORIES*.

The story *TERRITORIES* is trying to tell is not just about Carnival. Rather, it is a deconstruction of Carnival and what it represents. According to Homi K. Bhabba,

"In order to understand the productivity of colonial power it is crucial to construct its regime of 'truth,' not to subject its representations to a normalizing judgement. Only then does it become possible to understand the productive ambivalence of the object of colonial discourse — that 'otherness' which is at once an object of desire and derision, an articulation of difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity. What such a reading reveals are the boundaries of colonial discourse and it enables a transgression of these limits from the space of otherness" (1983:19).

In *TERRITORIES*, Julien precisely tries to reconstruct that regime of truth. However, he simultaneously tries to transcend it both by deconstructing it and by creating an alternative regime of truth. The film knows a silenced truth, which cannot be expressed by the old language, thus, "the struggle to tell the story."

Julien's strategy for telling the story is to make the gaze black. He attempts to do this by having black people, whose faces are not visible but who speak from a diegetic space, give us their reading of the images. He also try to defamiliarize images by manipulating them in a different way: he uses freeze frames, he reverses the images, tints them, turns them upside down.

The film begins with the word *TERRITORIES*, marked out in yellow on a black background. The outer limit of each of the letters in the word contains images, as if through a prison bar. The camera zooms into the word, explodes its limits, and

gives the viewer access to what it signifies, what it contains. Then, a quasi-choral voice over of a male and a female speaker is heard, superimposed over an image of a black man huddled against a ruin. This combination of sound and image further explores the notion of "territory" even as it sets the agenda for the film. The camera tilts down in close up from the ruin and then tilts up to reveal a black man, excluded even from the ruins, huddling to keep warm,. The film will also end with images of ruined, bricked-up buildings. If one can read these ruins as a symbol for Britain, the place of blacks in it is then clarified by the initial voice over, also to be repeated at various times throughout the film. The voice-over tells us,

"A new context for the political struggle for the disseminated mass of unwanted labour is provided by the streets of civil society. Its territories: the contradictory spaces which are the geographical expressions of a city. The territories of class, labour, race, sex relations. Territory. The holding of one class' privilege in a declining system of crisis. Territories of desire, the control of one space, carnival, territory of resistance, sound systems, territories of surveillance of the mind. Territory of sexual expressions (of the body). The contradictory spaces, the geographical expressions that cohabit a city. The territory of the look. Territories of the body, conflicting with dominant demands. Behind each conflict there is a history a her/story. We are struggling to tell a story, a her/story, a history of cultural forms specific to black people."

The story is told in an experimental documentary form. The film distances itself from traditional documentary, which it claims contains Carnival as, "an aesthetic spectacle." It distances itself from documentary convention by, among other devices, having two black women look at a video monitor showing these images of carnival. The spectator is made to align his/her gaze with theirs. We relegate our look as the carnival footage is reversed, freeze-framed, examined in ways which we are not used to. This image manipulation is accompanied by a woman's voice that tells us,

"Colonial fantasy requires a fixed image of the black person or the Other. But it is based on a complex kind of fixedness. The Other signifies both fear and desire and disorder due to the way in which blackness evokes both fear and fantasy on behalf of white society."

The film uses repetition and juxtaposition to shatter that fixedness. It divorces images of Carnival and of riots against the police from those images' traditional dual meaning: depicting blacks as fetishized into primitive, erotic "Other" and depicting blacks as problem.

TERRITORIES provides an incantation of sound and images. The film is layered so that images become repeated and acquire different possible meanings in different contexts. But the range of those meanings are limited through continuous reference to black voices and black looks. Close ups of sound speakers and eyes and faces staring back at the camera are edited in at intervals throughout the film. The gaze into the audience seemingly both questions and testifies to the viewer's witnessing and interpreting.

The film conveys "a history of black forms specific to black people through

explanations of the tradition of carnival, of dancing, of music. The scenes of dub versioning provide "a deconstructive aesthetic which "distances" and lays bare the musical anatomy of the original song through skillful re-editing which sculpts out aural space for the DJ's talk-over" (Mercer 1988b: 54-55). Such scenes can be seen as metaphoric for what the film itself is trying to do through similar editing and through the use of discontinuous gaps between image and sound, frequent fades to black and the preponderant use of jump cut montage.

The second part of the film visually introduces sexual difference, in the form of homosexuality, as one of the territories being contested in Britain. An image of two men embracing is superimposed over a burning Union Jack. At other times, a close up of one of the gay men looking at the audience from the right side of the screen will be frozen as a close up of a stern policeman is superimposed onto the left side of the screen. The dominant musical accompaniment has Joan Baez singing "The Ballad of Sacco and Vanzetti":

"Against us is the power of police...
Against us is the gold...
Against us is the law..."

TERRITORIES is a film that invites viewers into critical interaction. It is open-ended and amenable to various interpretations. But it also builds boundaries through which spectatorship cannot cut. The foundation of those barriers is the periodical looking back at the audience by black subjects. It would be easy to consume the images of oppression depicted in TERRITORIES as our daily dose of misery, easily digested and functionally excreted. Many of us do that daily as we switch from the evening news to GOLDEN GIRLS or another sitcom. TERRITORIES resists such easy dismissal by catching us in the act of looking. The look back has the effect of transforming us from passive voyeurs into conscious witnesses, however unwilling.

PASSION OF REMEMBRANCE

PASSION OF REMEMBRANCE, which Julien co-directed with Maureen Blackwood, extends many of the concerns expressed in TERRITORIES. Or rather it makes the agenda more inclusive. At times PASSION OF REMEMBRANCE seems crammed with every possible issue of importance to black filmmakers: racism, sexism, homophobia, police brutality, the decline of industrial society, links to civil rights struggles in the United States etc.. But unlike TERRITORIES, PASSION OF REMEMBRANCE is a feature film, one with two directors at that; and in view of its length and its aspirations it uses different formal strategies.

Oddly enough, in spite of being a fiction film, PASSION OF REMEMBRANCE well fits Grierson's dictum for documentary: "the creative treatment of actuality." The phrase is perhaps vague enough to fit all film and photography. However, if we note that PASSION OF REMEMBRANCE is involved with representations of social processes, that it relies heavily on montage, that it is concerned with social change and that it experiments with form, the comparison might seem more apt. That is perhaps the limit of the resemblance, however. Griersonian documentary has been criticized for hiding the worker behind the machine. In PASSION OF REMEMBRANCE the individual is at the center, the form is fiction, and the point-of-view is female.

PASSION OF REMEMBRANCE's narrative is woven through different strands. There is "The Woman's Story," which is metaphoric. "She" represents black women activists. "He" represents black male activists. They exist in a mythical place called "Here" where "She" arrogantly reproaches and accuses "Him" for his phallocentrism and self-absorption. There is also Maggie's story. Maggie is young, black, British and working class. Her struggle is to negotiate her needs and her vision of a movement with a legacy of black activism in Britain which she finds both inspiring and, to the extent that that inheritance is also accompanied by a measure of machismo and homophobia, oppressive.

Maggie's story particularizes the debates the mythical "They" are arguing about. Each picks up the slack from the other when the form of each section seems unable to contain articulation. Maggie's story is one of the lived experiences that make up "Her" story. However, "She" is also a generation older than Maggie. "Her" history as an activist encompasses subjugation and exclusion from active decision-making by black men within the movement. Maggie's struggle is partly in honor of "Her" history, partly a struggle against that history being repeated in a new generation of black women activists. The complementary stories of Maggie, "Her," and Maggie as part of "Her" are bounded by a rich family life, an oppressive social situation, and the death and funeral of a young black man.

PASSION OF REMEMBRANCE attempts to reconstruct and activate a memory of a black history in Britain. This is done through a mosaic structure in which difference is marked even as the elements of the mosaic make up a whole. There are links to the civil rights movement in the United States ("the real struggle was on the other side of the Atlantic") even as the British and U.S. movements are seen as different struggles for different futures:

"she knew the site of any struggle was real...
[we are] staking a claim for the future [in Britain]..."

Black is divided from white (as shown in "His" anecdote about Sergeant Kendall) even as black and white are linked through class: "They're being treated like blacks," says Maggie about footage of police harassing coal miners. The monologues between "He" and "She" denote a gender barrier within a common struggle, while at a meeting Gary and Michael, Maggie's gay friends, bring up the question of homophobia within the Movement.

The idea of nation in PASSION OF REMEMBRANCE is just as important as it was in TERRITORIES. Here Britain is depicted in similar terms. After a montage of padlocks, ruins, broken windows, deserted buildings, dirt, and robber tires, Tony (an activist involved in the Movement since the 60s) tells the unemployed Benjy (Maggie's father) that the younger generation has "grown up with this." England is shown to be a country riddled with class conflict, racism, sexism, unemployment "This can't be my England," mocks Maggie's friend Louise, "not the England my grandfather's father fought for."

The very first shot of the film shows archival footage of black women demonstrating, their fists raised in protest. Footage of demonstrations recur throughout the film; the various montages of that footage indicate that the range of grievances citizens have against the state may be a common link. However,

differences between black and white are not diminished: "Get out of our flicking country!" yell some thugs to a black family while the police witness and, through inaction, condone the abuse. As "He" tells us,

"We've woken up to a situation, a country, a time, a system that is so frightening, so all embracing in the way that it lives our lives for us, or changes them or obliterates them, that we don't believe this is reality."

PASSION OF REMEMBRANCE is just as concerned with trying to tell its story as is TERRITORIES. In its attempt it uses similar strategies. The archival footage of demonstrations and police brutality are always filtered through a black gaze, mostly a black female one. Maggie gazes into the monitor, and we follow her gaze as the film cuts to the footage. Or Maggie and Louise together guide our gaze, or Maggie's memory of her introducing a tape to a meeting sets the guidelines to our viewing. In the one instance when Tony, Maggie, and Louise watch footage together, Maggie and Louise afterwards critique Tony's interpretation of it.

Like in TERRITORIES we are distanced from familiar interpretations of familiar footage by having it presented in different ways: faster, slower, upside down, drained of color, with extra color added. PASSION OF REMEMBRANCE, however also attempts to introduce new representations, ones that fit in uneasily with traditional narrative's use of plot. For example, images such as that of Michael swimming are held for a longtime. They do not further the plot. They just revel in the beauty and sensuality of black bodies in motion. Such images are unusual in the sense that in traditional dominant modes of narrative, black male sexuality is usually avoided (as in most of Sidney Poitier's films) or is presented as threatening (black exploitation films). Likewise the reason for lengthily prolonging the scene of Louise and Maggie dancing while making up and getting dressed is to depict black women reveling in each other's company, enjoying each other's sensuality.

The most interesting aspect of PASSION OF REMEMBRANCE is how it succeeds in making both "black" and "woman" — two perennial kinds of cinematic "otherness" into a single enunciator. This is the only instance in Julien's oeuvre where this occurs. PASSION OF REMEMBRANCE is also the only film he co-directed. One can thus, without resorting to essentialism, impute that the film's privileging of a female point-of-view must in great measure be due to Maureen Blackwood.

After the initial shot of women demonstrating, the camera cuts to "Her," who addresses the audience directly. She narrates that story which is acted out mostly by Maggie. Though male characters are sometimes subjects of particular scenes in the film, their subjectivity is delegated either by "Her" (as in the case of "His" monologues) or by Maggie. In the cases where males are given a voice or made subjects without the previous benefit of female consent, women are given the last word. For example, there is a scene in which Benjy and Tony talk about unemployment and later dance together; this scene ends with Maggie telling the men off. As she closes the door on them, the film cuts to a new scene. Finally, the last shot of the film is a freeze-frame of "her" gazing at "Him" as he disappears into the mist of the mythic "here."

"Who will hear me now as I remember and talk of remembering," wonders Maggie at the beginning of the film. The film provides its own answer near the end — black

British people. As Gary gazes at a coffin of a young black man who's been murdered, he "thinks" to him, "The media may choose to forget while we do not." The voice over then changes its address to the audience:

"His memory lives with us. We're in a war that's bleeding liberation. Ghosts of people who come back again and again questioning, questioning the mockery and fictions held by centuries of traditions based upon bankruptcy and lies infested in Englishness at its worst."

PASSION OF REMEMBRANCE offers a black woman's point-of-view directed at a black male and female audience (a rarity, though perhaps more likely from a collaborative effort co-directed by a woman and a gay man.) In PASSION OF REMEMBRANCE the "us" and the "we" refer to black people. Whites are not addressed. They serve merely as the grain against which a black identity is formed, as blacks' "Other."

THIS IS NOT AN AIDS ADVERTISEMENT

THIS IS NOT AN AIDS ADVERTISEMENT is a short Super-8 film, Like TERRITORIES, it was made as a reaction to a specific situation: In TERRITORIES it was Carnival; in THIS IS NOT AN AIDS ADVERTISEMENT it was homophobic safe-sex ads. The dominant message in the latter is, "Feel no shame in your desire? The formal strategy to convey the message is an extension of that employed in TERRITORIES.

THIS IS NOT AN AIDS ADVERTISEMENT, like TERRITORIES, relies on accretion of images, their repetition, variation, and juxtaposition to create meaning. Unlike in TERRITORIES, the first part employs no voice over, The second part is accompanied by a kind of rap song made up of fragments from various sources arguing against guilt — "It's the heart afraid of breaking that never learns to dance; it's the dream afraid of waking that never learns to chance" — and for love — "Some say love it is a razor that leaves your soul to bleed; some say love it is a hunger, an endless aching need; I say love it is a flower and you its only seed."

The salient images in the first part are these:

- low-angle shots of waves, their caps changing color from shot to shot high-angle shots of skies framed by trees;
- a black youth and a white youth hugging as they look at the camera, extend to it a bouquet of flowers and then bring the flowers to their chest;
- a face, seemingly dizzy and pained, on which is superimposed a shaft of light coming into a room;
- police boots running up steps to stomp on the flower.
- In the last image, the couple laughingly kiss.

The images are amenable to various interpretations. Mine is that the filmmaker is trying to express males-loving-males as an activity that is deep, vast, ancient (there is a recurring shot of an ancient Roman relief depicting a male). And one which, in spite of official attempts to deny and stomp it out, persists. The representation of the interracial gay couple is significant in that as Kobena Mercer argues, in the war against AIDS, both blacks and gays have been labeled a threat:

"Racism and homophobia activate similar psychological defense-mechanisms whereby people avoid their inner fears by projecting them externally onto some Other" (1988c:152-153).

The second part begins with a male head turning, trying to face the audience as if struggling to materialize. It finally does so and stares blankly at the audience. This section is characterized by the accretion of images introduced in the first section juxtaposed against new ones. The images are cut to the beat of the soundtrack's rap. The figures in the frame invariably look back at the audience. They are aggressive objects who gain subjectivity through the matching of their gaze to that of the audience. A recurring image in the first section of a blindfolded man unblocking his eyes and gaining sight makes more forceful the power of their gaze. The film's message becomes underlined through a kind of video aesthetic of synchronously superimposing the different words that make up the phrase, "Feel no shame in your desire," onto various images. This section, like the first, ends with the laughing kiss of the interracial mate couple.

"There is a Third World in every First World," writes Trinh T. Minh-ha (1986: 3). If we take that statement metaphorically, we can see in Julien's work a cinematic mapping out of different "Third Worlds." In *TERRITORIES* oppressed groups are the State's Third World. In *PASSION OF REMEMBRANCE* the black gay couple and black women can be seen as black heterosexual male activists' "Third World." In *THIS IS NOT AN AIDS ADVERTISEMENT* a disease is the cause of the First World's combined condemnation of race and homosexuality. Trinh, however, also notes that "'looking back' and 'talking back' form a necessary step to the unsaying of what has been said and congealed" (1986/87:3).

I have tried to show that talking back is an integral part of Julien's work both in the discourse he creates and, integrally interlinked, in the form through which he conveys the discourses, with particular note of the device of "looking back" at the audience as a cinematic form of "talking back." I have also tried to show that *TERRITORIES* and *PASSION OF REMEMBRANCE* also engage in a historical "looking back" in that they both try, to different extents, to unearth and reconstruct a history of black British culture. *LOOKING FOR LANGSTON*, Julien's latest film, takes this "looking back" and "talking back" a step further.

LOOKING FOR LANGSTON

"A party of whites from Filth Avenue
Came tippin into Dixie's to get a view
Came tippin into Dixie's with smiles on their faces
Knowing they can buy a dozen colored places.
Dixie grinned. Dixie bowed.
Dixie rubbed his hands and laughed out—
While a tall white woman In an ermine cape
Looked at the blacks and
Thought of rape,
Looked at the blacks and thought of a rope,
Looked at the blacks and
Thought of a flame
And thought of something

Without a name."
— Langston Hughes (1942:60)

"Hello Sailor Boy
In from the sea!
Hello, sailor
Come with me!

Come on drink cognac,
Rather have wine?
Come here, I love you,
Come and be mine."
— Langston Hughes (1926:74)

There is a certain kind of poetic justice in Isaac Julien's making a film about Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance and dedicating it to James Baldwin. Hughes and Baldwin were black homosexual artists.[8] Like Julien, Hughes and other artists of the "Harlem Renaissance" were drawing on a history of black culture to try to create new forms that would contain and communicate new representations. Hughes tried this by creating a blues language for poetry.[9]

Speaking of some of the visual artists of the Harlem Renaissance, Mary Schmidt Campbell writes,

"Each developed a vital aspect of the Renaissance ethos — be it glorification of the Black American's African heritage, the tradition of Black folklore or interest in the details of Black life. Each broke dramatically with earlier Black art and earlier representations of Blacks in art. They were among the first Americans to celebrate Black history and culture and they were the first artists to define a visual vocabulary for Black Americans" (p. 13).

In trying to evoke Hughes, Julien "looks back" and finds a history of black art, a history of representations of blacks, and a history of black homosexuality. In *LOOKING FOR LANGSTON* he "talks back" these histories by collating them, interpolating a stylized critique of some current representations of black men as fetish. He sets this evocation against a mixture of '20s U.S. blues and 80s British blues. Thus, Hughes' lines of poetry, "Why should it be my loneliness, why should it be my song, why should it be my dream deferred overlong?" is followed by Blackberri, a black British singer, answering back with, "Whatever happened to a dream deferred? Things haven't changed much, I still find power in your words," Julien thus links black British culture and black American culture through time and space as a diaspora culture.

LOOKING FOR LANGSTON tries to affirm a black gay identity. If the Harlem Renaissance was one of the golden ages of black diaspora culture, the film tells us that slot of its brilliance came from homosexuals: Countee Cullen, Alain Locke, Bruce Nugent, Harold Jackman and others. The film links the Harlem Renaissance

to contemporary Britain when a black British voice over tells us. "We were linked by our gay desire." The same voice over also warns that not to discuss the "moral significance of Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, choosing in the main others of their kind to love, is to emasculate and embalm their society as a whole."

In *History of Sexuality, An Introduction*, Michel Foucault writes that, in Western society, "it is through sex...that each individual has to pass in order to have access to his own intelligibility...to the whole of his body...to his identity" (1984:155-56). LOOKING FOR LANGSTON tries to chart a course through this discourse. But in order to finish the movement from sex to identity, it must first reappropriate the image of the black male body.

The black man has often been depicted as civility's absolute "Other." As Kobena Mercer writes,

"Classical racism involved a logic of dehumanisation in which African peoples were defined as having bodies but no minds" (1988c:137). Black males were often not even seen to have bodies. According to Fanon, "One is no longer aware of the Negro, but only of a penis; the Negro is eclipsed. He is turned into a penis. He is a penis" (cited in Mercer 1988c:150).

In the regime described by Foucault as power-knowledge-pleasure, the black man is powerless, he is excluded from knowledge, and the pleasure his body represents to white society is one that is simultaneously imbued with danger. If we agree with Foucault that such a regime is what "sustains the discourse on human sexuality in our part of the world" (p. 11) and that such a discourse is necessary for identity, then the black man has to be empowered, given access to knowledge, and made to take pleasure in his own body. LOOKING FOR LANGSTON attempts just that in order to topple the privileged regime.

In LOOKING FOR LANGSTON Julien acknowledges the dominant discourse on black masculinity and simultaneously refutes it. Verbally this is done through a voice over reading of U.S. black gay poet Essex Hemphill's poetry in two consecutive stages. The first offers an accusation to whites: "You want his pleasure/ without guilt or capture. You don't notice many things about him." The second Hemphill reading offers a refutation: "He doesn't always wear a red ski cap/ eat fried chicken/fuck like a jungle."

Visually the same effect is achieved by showing white pleasure in black bodies. A montage shows as a white man in close up.[10] A cut then shows the same man caressing the photographs as they are projected onto sheets. We then see the white man give a black man money. Throughout this montage a voice set to music accusingly queries the white man's activities and motives:

"I don't suppose you ever HEAR him clearly?/ You're always too busy/ seeking other things of him/ His name isn't important/ It would be coincidence/ if he had a name, a face, a mind./ If he's not hard-on, he's hard-up."

As Julien recuperates the colonized image of the black man, he tries to infuse it

with new meaning. The sexuality of the black men presented is divorced from any violence, except perhaps the one imposed by the white psyche. Moreover, the images aren't so much concerned with representing sex but with representing desire. A substantial part of the film is concerned with affirming the concept of black beauty and making it, and those who possess it, an object of desire. As the lyrics for one of the songs used in the film tells us,

"Look at me, beautiful black man
I'm just like you
You know that I face
discrimination too
Got here about ten
I walked into this place
But nobody here would look me in the face
You're such a beautiful black man
Don't you walk with your head down bending low
Don't you do that no more."

Beauty is depicted through a process of fetishization, and it is made desirable by making it the object of both the spectator's and the film's gaze. The latter is effected through the camera and also is designated to various characters within the diegesis.[11] The mythical "Beauty" in the film is given special lighting that delineates his cheekbones, the camera tilts and pans across his body. We are shown a close up of his eyes that indicate his eyelashes have been perfectly curled. A poem tells us how Langston dreams of him and describes different parts of his body.

"Beauty," however is only one kind of black beauty. The end of the film shows us an image of him with his face resting on a mirror, an image of Narcissus. In the same montage, we are shown another black man, darker, stouter. He too looks into a mirror and makes a gesture as if to indicate that he's woken up, gained a consciousness of his own beauty, acknowledged his own worth.

As in his other films, Julien often prevents automatic suture.[12] The viewer is often made conscious of his/her absence through a self-conscious narration which, among other things, looks back at the audience: Langston looks straight at the audience before we enter his dream. A man looking at porn stares directly at the audience as if they were the porn. Beauty undresses the white man and laughingly looks at the camera as he throws it a shirt. A shot of a man dancing and laughing while looking straight at the audience will be intercut into the film's final montage three times.

Stephen Heath asserts that the viewing subject's break with the initial relation to the image is "essential to the realization of image as signifier" (1985: 88), and the "suturing function includes the spectator as part of an imaginary production (p. 90)." Such theoretical concepts point to: how the way that Julien instigates and underlines a break with the image affects cinematic signification. If LOOKING FOR LANGSTON's form of fusion of poetry, music, archival footage and new images were not already enough, such a strategy of rupture makes the viewer think about the kind of signification s/he is helping to construct.

"Obviously, an Afro American spokesperson who wished to engage in a masterful and empowering play within the minstrel spirit house needed the uncanny ability

to manipulate phonic legacies. For he or she had the task of transforming the mass and its sounds into negotiable discursive currency. In effect, the task was the production of a manual of black speaking, a book of speaking back and black." — Houston A. Baker, Jr. (1987:24)

Baker is talking about another country, another culture, another medium. But the need to talk back and to talk black is just as evident in the films of Issac Julien. I say *need*: because Julien's cinema is clearly a political cinema. Whereas others are moaning about the waning of affect (not realizing just how privileged one has to be to be able to feel that way), Julien's cinema underlines race, class, gender and sexual orientation. It's hard to take the notion of free floating signifiers seriously when black as the color of your skin or a Hispanic name on your application form consistently means denial of work, or when two men kissing in public consistently means license to beat them up.

Western culture has for centuries provided the ideological rationale for imperialism, racism, and other forms of oppression. The present "crises of cultural authority, specifically of the authority vested in Western European culture and its institutions" (Owen 1983: 57) is no big loss for people who have historically been excluded from participating in Western meta-narratives. Marginalized peoples, especially diaspora people, brought, formed and reshaped other *récits*, grand ones made mini only by Western culture's devalorization of them as "primitive," "savage," "Other." As Paul Gilroy notes,

"Who is it that people like Fredric Jameson are talking about when they say, 'Our grand narratives are collapsing'? Some of us, who have been denied access to some of the diachronic payoff that people like Jameson take for granted are just beginning to formulate our own big narratives, precisely as narratives of redemption and emancipation." (1988:46)

"Now that, in the postmodern age, you all feel so dispersed," writes black British theorist Stuart Hall, "I become centred" (Quoted in Meter 1988a: 5). Though I find Hall's comment interesting to think about, I doubt its sentiment is widely shared. However, I do think relations between the margins and the center are dynamic. I think that the way Julien demonstrates dominant depictions of race, refutes them, and offers new alternatives is a means of visualizing and helping to promote a positive shift. However, whether the strategies Julien uses to "look back and talk black" — his use of montage, non-classical continuity, direct address, his attempts at deconstruction previous imagery and the self-conscious narration of his narratives — succeed in negotiating a discursive currency is another question, one that only time and research into audiences will answer.

Notes on [page 2](#)

The films of Isaac Julien

page 2

from *Jump Cut*, no. 36, May 1991, pp. 98-107, 10

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NOTES

This paper derives from a course on British Cinema taught by Andrew Higson at the University of East Anglia and a presentation at the 1990 SCS conference in Washington. I would like to thank Andy Medhurst, David Hall and Deborah Regula for their feedback during the writing stage, and Chuck Kleinhans, Julia Lesage and Mark Reid for their helpful editing suggestions.

1. Marine Attile admits that "there was a sense of accountability imposed on us by our community to produce certain types of images." (Fuseo. p.26) Nevertheless, black filmmakers and perhaps any minority filmmaker, are charged with the extra responsibility of community accountability no matter who or what enabled their filmmaking. See, for example, Mahmood Jamal's "Dirty Linen," one of the many tirades against MY BEAUTIFUL LAUNDRETTE.

2. All of these issues are clearly presented through a wide range of articles collected in Mercer, *Black Films, British Cinema*.

3. I find Williamson's piece asked many incisive questions. But I also found certain aspects disturbing. I have yet to see any white political group get the degree of flack for their choice of film practice that Sankofa and Black Audio are subject to. The form/ audience equation I find particularly tiresome. Old classic realist versus avant-garde debates ignore that there is a whole generation who has grown up watching music videos who have access to, and derive various pleasure from, many forms. Practices previously the privileged domain of "High Culture" are now a flick of the switch from WHEEL OF FORTUNE. I find a large portion of vanity sprinkled with an equally large dose of condescension in the experts' harping about how inaccessible these films are. Moreover, I think there is an unwarranted assumption in a lot of the criticism that a more "accessible" form would automatically translate into larger audiences and thus greaser political effectiveness.

I don't have access to British box-office or television ratings, but were other Workshop films more popular? And how many were less? Certainly in North America, and I don't understand why this is such a sore point with British critics, these films' form is greatly responsible for the distribution they did get. As to political effectiveness, one can't talk about the films in isolation from the body of critical work that has stemmed from them. For Julian, for example, the writing and the filmmaking seem to be part of a singular politic. Others like Stuart Hall, Jim

Pines, and Salman Rushdie have contributed to very important political debates that are the result of the films. And I would argue that the work of Kobena Mercer, without which this paper could probably not have been written, has shifted some of the ground on which notions of race, representation and cinema are debated. (See the references).

4. I am not trying to impute essentiality by my usage of the term "black films." I merely mean films by black filmmakers.

5. This is a paraphrase of information given to me by Isaac Julien in March, 1989. The budget for *LANGSTON* was approximately 100,000 pounds.

6. Rushdie doesn't know the score, at least as regards film. The quote is taken from a piece in which he paradoxically and confusedly criticizes *HANDSWORTH SONGS* for not attempting to create a new language when in fact the problem is that he doesn't know the old one well enough to recognize the contributions *SONGS* makes. See "SONGS Doesn't Know the Score", *Black Film, British Cinema*, p. 16.

'7. Lea Jacobs (pp. 157-161) defines enunciation, as the attitude of the speaking subject in the face of his (*son*) *énoncé*, this taking part in the world of objects, The process of enunciation, thus envisaged, is described as a relative distance that the subject puts between himself (*lui-même*) and this *énoncé*," Thus the term *énonciator*, as I use it in the paper, refers to the person who has the right of speech within the film.

8. I would like to follow historian John D'Emilio (pp. 110-116) in his usage of "homosexual" to denote homosexual behavior and "gay" so denote homosexual identity. Julien commenting on black homosexuals has written, "If one looks to the United States, from the perspective of a diaspora culture, one can look to Langston Hughes or James Baldwin — they're the most visible figures of our continuity in black history." See "Interview," 1988.

9. According to Arnold Rampersad, "(Hughes') finest poems ... remained those saturated in blues language, the idiom of the black folk that Hughes had pioneered in literacy verse in 1923 with his poem "The Weary Blues," then developed to its zenith as art in *Fine Clothes to the Jew* in 1927. Blues was a way of singing but above all a way of feeling, when the pain of circumstance is transcended by the will to survive — of which the most stylish token, aside from the blues song itself, is the impulse to laughter."(p. 20)

10. Speaking of Soviet Cinema, David Bordwell notes that "the relentless presence of montage in these films aims to keep the spectator from constructing any action as simply an unmediated piece of the fabula world." (p. 239) The same could be said for the use of montage in Julien's films.

11. Metz has written, "The fetishistic prop will become a precondition for the establishment of potency and access to orgasm (*jouissance*), sometimes an indispensable precondition (true fixation); in other developments it will only be a favourable condition, and one whose weight will vary with respect to the features of the erotogenic situation as a whole." (p. 70) In *LANGSTON*, Beauty's fetishization is an almost metaphoric manifestation of the latter, in the sense that it is used

almost as a pre-condition for the film as erotogenic situation.

12. According to Stephen Heath, the process of reading a film takes us from sheer jubilation in the image to an awareness of the frame that breaks this initial relation. We, the spectator, recognize an absence, the discontinuity, of the image, its production as signifier. We then fill in the absence, sew up the shots, suture the discourse. Heath writes, "The major emphasis in all this is that the articulation of the signifying chain of images, of the chain of images as signifying, works not from image to image but from image to image through the absence that the subject constitutes...Thus the break in the initial relation with the image is sutured...across the spectator constituted as cinematic...subject, essential to the realisation of image as signifier and to the articulation of the shots together" (1981: 76-113).

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[Go to page 1](#)

[To top](#) [Current issue](#) [Archived essays](#) [Jump Cut home](#)

Ethnic Notions. Tongues Untied Mainstreams and margins

by Chuck Kleinhans

from *Jump Cut*, no. 36, May 1991, pp. 108-111

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Marlon Riggs' two major videos, *ETHNIC NOTIONS* and *TONGUES UNTIED*, stand at two very different points of contemporary documentary activity. *ETHNIC NOTIONS* is an Emmy-winning tape using a classic PBS expository format. In sharp contrast, *TONGUES UNTIED* weaves poetry, performance, confession, and history in a complex pattern for a personal editorial statement. The one is thoroughly conventional, the other thoroughly innovative. Both of them also represent major statements by a black intellectual who works primarily in the medium of video, rather than the traditional media of spoken and written words. At a time when print culture seems in slow but definite decline, Riggs stands among the most talented African American intellectuals choosing new forms of expression to raise critical questions for black politics and for a broader U.S. political culture.

TONGUES UNTIED (1989, 55 min.) describes the situation, politics and culture of black gay men using an intense mixture of styles ranging from social documentary to experimental montage, from personal narrative to lyric poetry. Through daring juxtapositions it functions as a critique of white racism as well as African-American and white homophobia while sounding a call for black gay men to unite. One of the most powerful and effective political videotapes made in recent years, *TONGUES UNTIED* is formally complex, politically passionate, and unhesitatingly self-revealing. It treats issues revealing the interconnection of race and gender politics with sophistication and in so doing persuades its viewers that these matters are significant and urgent.

Given my own situation as a straight white man, I can consider the tape's obvious importance to black gay men only in terms of the critical discussion the tape has generated. That dialogue makes it clear that *TONGUES UNTIED* is not merely a report on gay males in the African-American community, but a major intellectual intervention which is helping create the terms in which black gay men are collectively thinking and imagining their identity. While originally intended for a primary audience of black gay men, in release the tape has been shown successfully to diverse audiences. It thus becomes an important point of political discourse within the black community in general, in the gay community, and in the straight white culture. How the tape achieves that position can be best understood with a

close analysis.

It is tempting to write about Riggs' work by projecting a simple development from the conventional ETHNIC NOTIONS to the experimental TONGUES UNTIED. However I'm wary of so doing. Each represents a different strategy for different primary audiences and different issues. And subsequently Riggs produced two additional short experimental pieces — ANTHEM and AFFIRMATIONS — while also working on a sequel to ETHNIC NOTIONS, tentatively titled COLOR ADJUSTMENT: BLACKS IN PRIME TIME, which covers more recent depictions. Clearly he is accomplished as a media maker in both mainstream and marginal discourses.

ETHNIC NOTIONS: THE LOGIC OF MAINSTREAMING

"There is nothing wrong with tap dancing. There is nothing wrong with using your voice, your body, as a musical instrument. It is the laughter, and the music, and the dancing at the *exclusion* of dramatic images, of realistic images, that is at fault. And it's this exclusion which we hope to dissolve." — choreographer Leni Sloan, concluding ETHNIC NOTIONS.

Marlon Riggs' earlier tape, ETHNIC NOTIONS (1986) is an hour-long educational documentary on the history of popular culture's demeaning stereotypes and caricatures of African Americans from the early 19th century to the middle of the 20th century. It uses what might be called an almost pure public broadcasting format, reflecting in part its initial production in conjunction with KQED, the San Francisco PBS station. Since its first broadcast the tape has circulated very successfully in the education market. Many teachers have found it exceptionally useful in demonstrating and explaining mass culture racism to white students.

A good part of this effectiveness stems from ETHNIC NOTION'S use of "mainstream" presentational style. Among independent media producers, "mainstreaming" means accepting the dominant forms and values of conventional media. For those coming from oppressed and marginalized groups — racial and ethnic minorities, women gays and lesbians, the working class and poor, political radicals, youth — mainstreaming means speaking not from one's original position, but constructing a discourse within the already established system of power in order to speak effectively within a larger circle. Fundamentally it serves the goal of assimilation for both maker and group. For the outsider group, mainstreaming implies showing how one is like the dominant culture by mimicking its forms and calling on a politics of liberal pluralism. For the media maker, mainstreaming promises acceptance, larger and diverse audiences, a chance to break into the dominant system, better chances in the grant game, bigger budgets, more prestige, etc.

ETHNIC NOTIONS uses an illustrated presentation of an analysis by authority figures. For the most part a balance of white and black, male and female talking heads identified by name and university and shot in a black limbo present the evolution of various stereotypes: the sambo, the mammy, the coon, the pickaninny, the Uncle Tom. An unseen, female, voice over narrator bridges the interviewed experts, and additional voices sing songs and read from various written texts such as storybooks. Key points are introduced with striking examples, elaborated by the academics and illustrated with still and moving images. The essayistic movement

from point to point is clear, the authorities don't contradict each other and can sometimes be cut together in smoothly flowing exposition, bridged by cutaways to film clips, still and animated cartoon images, or documentary photos. The main point is undeniable: the U.S. has a long history of using demeaning caricatures of African Americans in its popular culture and these stereotypes embody and perpetuate racism.

High production values and clear presentation make ETHNIC NOTIONS easy to follow. As a result, the tape has been extensively used in black studies, popular culture, and communications courses in high schools and colleges. Teachers find its examples memorable and thought provoking for students. Many white students today are not familiar with the material and find the historical review informative. Many black students can recall seeing similar examples or derivative stereotyping in their own experience. Discussion following the screening is usually lively and raises many pertinent points.

Toward the tape's end several sequences are introduced with bold intertitles that recapitulate the preceding exposition of racial slurs: black is ugly; blacks are savage; blacks are happy servants. This emphasis is just the sort of thing that in a classroom situation would start the students note taking. But in addition to its excellent organization, there are some other reasons why teachers find the tape so useful. First of all, it flatters liberal and moderate sensibilities by having both white and black experts delivering a lecture on racial stereotypes with many examples that very few white students would fail to find appalling, or, minimally, socially unpleasant to tolerate — at least in classroom discussion. Ash trays shaped like human heads that hold cigarettes in grotesquely exaggerated lips, supposedly comic postcards showing alligators threatening pickaninny children, and animated cartoons of happy coons devouring watermelon slices present images which are easily marked as offensive. As with much liberal media work, the tape makes the media the main culprit: if we could just get beyond negative images and kitsch caricatures in popular culture, it seems to say, we could achieve racial harmony and equality.

Unmistakable irony marks certain passages, as when a song about happy slaves on the plantation is illustrated with a photo of extensive scars from whippings on a slave's back. In this way it has a strategy that is rather typical of PBS historical documentary: something unpleasant from the past is shown, the present day audience can be appropriately distressed at how bad it was, and then at the end we can all feel good that it isn't like that any more.

Because it centers so much attention on kitsch objects and entertainments such as minstrel shows and vaudeville, the tape also invites a rather easy scorn from middle class and middle class aspirant students. So obvious, so overcoded, virtually vomiting stereotypes, kitsch as the low end of popular culture consumed by aesthetically uneducated people, is always open to dismissal from a higher class position.^[1][\[open notes in new window\]](#) The more subtle racism of middlebrow entertainment considered progressive in its own time, such as SHOW BOAT or PORGY AND BESS, and artifacts such as "tourist art" African masks sold to decorate "buppie" apartments or highbrow art such as modernist appropriations of "primitive" art goes unspoken. And because the tape displays past kitsch whose racial caricature seems even more noticeable because dated, the objects are easy to

dismiss without seeing the connection to contemporary examples.

The tape is undeniably effective, and especially so in classes concerned with racism in the media and commonplace racial stereotyping. Yet by its specific focus, it doesn't deal with many related issues which could be addressed. The nature of caricature and stereotyping in mass culture is not considered in depth. Doesn't mass culture always simplify and stereotype? Isn't Arnold Schwarzenegger's star image a caricature? Or Dolly Parton's? Or Spike Lee's Mars Blackmon? Should we therefore be "against" caricature and stereotyping of all kinds in art? What about high art? Isn't it also racist in its presentations? Would the history of U.S. literature or painting reveal a distinctly different ideology than the popular culture examples do? (The tape does discuss Paul Robeson's film portrayal of the Eugene O'Neill play *Emperor Jones*, and notes its continuation of the savage stereotype.) These questions, and others that could be raised in extension of ideas touched on briefly in the tape, do not invalidate it. In fact, in a teaching situation they would be welcome additions to a discussion and would lead to a more complex analysis by the audience.

Part of the problem here is that by having such a rich array of historically based materials, the tape presents most of this as a problem of the past rather than of the present. Actually the voices bring us up to the present, but visuals to cover recent material (for which it would be difficult and much more expensive to gain copyright permission) are rather spare: two tracking shots across various publications and posters at the end are supposed to suggest the continuity to today. Many might give an easy assent to Morris Day, Mr. T, Eddie Murphy, or Redd Foxx (as Sanford).[2] But would we so readily agree that Bill Cosby, Richard Pryor, Prince, Run DMC, and Grace Jones (to mention some of the figures shown) continue these stereotypes without significant change? And among works not shown how would we evaluate satire such as Spike Lee's chock-full-of-stereotypes *SCHOOL DAZE*? Or the TV show *IN LIVING COLOR*? Does comic caricature differ somehow or significantly from simply demeaning propagandistic caricature? If so, how, and how can and do oppressed groups use humor within the context of such caricature?[3]

Riggs addresses some of these issues briefly in *TONGUES UNTIED*, referencing homophobia in Eddie Murphy's comedy and Spike Lee's *SCHOOL DAZE*. In a more recent article, he argues that current media representations of black gay men by black film/video makers, performers, and Rap musicians present repackaged versions of the Coon (now the Snap Queens seen on *IN LIVING COLOR*) or the Brute (as in the AIDS-infected homosexual Convict-Rapist in Reginald and Warrington Hudlin's *HOUSE PARTY*).[4] The result, he concludes, is to validate an "Afrocentric" Black Macho myth by crating a "Negro Faggot" Other within the black community's consciousness. In the process actual black gay men are denied their existence, their masculinity, and their blackness.

A further related problem of the PBS style is that *ETHNIC NOTIONS* offers a restricted discussion of how past change took place. It marks large changes such as the ante bellum period's portrayal of happy plantation slaves changing to the Reconstruction image of savages, and it explains changing power relations as a cause. While it shows clips from *BIRTH OF A NATION*, it doesn't mention that the NAACP spent an immense amount of its early organization efforts in criticizing and

organizing against the film. In fact, the NAACP was criticized at times by other African American and anti-racist organizations and individuals for putting so much energy into media pressure group work to the neglect of other forms of political organizing. The question of priorities must always be addressed in media organizing. To use an image from ETHNIC NOTIONS' parade of stereotypes: How important, given scarce resources, is it to try to change Aunt Jemima's picture on the pancake mix? What change occurs if she turns out slimmer and lighter skinned?

The tape explains that the Civil Rights movement drastically changed the public and popular image of black Americans and that this ended the period of extreme caricature. The tape doesn't mention that this was also the period when the black professional athlete became a major part of U.S. sports entertainment. Surely having many mass culture images of physically strong and skilled African American men also shaped public consciousness. ETHNIC NOTIONS doesn't indicate effective strategies and tactics for today in addressing mass culture racism. Two experts indicate that there is little change in the 70s and 80s: mammy figures appear in TV shows, black comedians continue the minstrel and buffoon tradition, and black men in action films are shown as more violent than white men. But this is stated, not illustrated. And the question of how black audience members understand and use mass media images is not explored.[5]

In using the PBS style, there is a limit to how many major ideas you can effectively present. It is fundamentally a linear style which uses orthodox exposition to make its points: dramatic opening examples, summary of the main points to be introduced, sequential progression through each section with a recapitulation of topic points at the start of each section and a summary conclusion at the end of each section, and a final summation. The primary structuring line comes from the verbal soundtrack: it is an illustrated script. This style and organization is very familiar to the audience. Its foundation is the expository essay taught in high school and college; it remains the dominant way educational and social-political documentaries are organized. It also produces a viewing experience which students find easy to take notes on, since their notes reproduce the general outline of the argument. And it is fairly easy to remember, thus gratifying the teacher who judges the pedagogical merits of the piece by student's ability to remember and repeat the tape's major ideas. But there is a limit to the number of major ideas a mediamaker can present this way: perhaps one every ten minutes or so, or about the same that a good college lecturer would offer.

There is another level of analysis in ETHNIC NOTIONS, one that is more complex and subtle, though it remains subordinate and fully emerges only in a few places. This argument is about cultural contradiction. It is stated most succinctly early on in the tape when racist caricatures are explained as stemming from the paradox of a nation founded on granting freedom to all while maintaining slavery as an institution. The tape argues that popular culture images, through accumulation, shape "gut level feelings" or beliefs, or "the perception of reality," or "part of our psyche." [6] Doubtless this is the most important first thing to say about such images. But it begs the questions of power and pleasure which shape the production, circulation, and reception of such images. On two occasions critic Barbara Christian mentions that African Americans come to believe in stereotypes of themselves, which become part of their psyche. But the point is not pursued or

illustrated. And because all the authorities speak in the third person about the reception and effects of racist caricature, it seems that "other people" absorb cultural racism while the authorities (and we viewers as attentive members of the audience) are inoculated against its influence.

The talking heads and illustrative cutaways style is significantly changed in a key section. One of the two nonacademic experts, choreographer Leni Sloan, makes several key points. First in interview, he discusses the origins of blackface minstrels first in the development of a unique African American dance style of shuffling and jumping which was an evasive accommodation to religious law which prohibited dancing which involved crossing the feet. In the 1820s a white entertainer who played as a black, T.D. Rice, mimicked a crippled black man dancing: a portrayal that became Jim Crow in minstrelsy. Sloan points out the complications of this historical evolution and its further elaboration when black performers were allowed on the minstrel stage but in blackface and with adopted Irish names. He then portrays in one-man show style, Bert Williams, the greatest African American blackface comedian who achieved star status and financial success on Broadway but who, the character tells us, couldn't get a drink in a neighborhood bar.

The effect of Sloan's presentation of Williams is remarkable within the tape because it brings the issues down to a first person narrative told directly to the camera, which accelerates an empathetic response. Sloan appears again, in the last shot in the film to say that when blacks are presented as only singing, dancing, and clowning to the exclusion of other aspects of their lives that popular culture imagery becomes racist. Sloan is the strongest of the authorities because he seems to speak with a fuller sense of contradiction, to speak from experience, from being "inside" the problem of artistic representation, while the other authorities speak from a distance.

At another point, near the end of the tape, a complex formal arrangement makes a powerful statement. Ethel Waters is seen and heard singing "Darkies Never Dream," a song that continues the pattern of docile mammies who only exist to serve whites. Intercut with her presentation is the sound and image of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. The contrast of audio/visual elements makes a political statement and also presents the fundamental contradiction between white-dominated popular culture images and black-articulated political aspirations using distinctly video graphic means.

To sum up, *ETHNIC NOTIONS* is a remarkably effective educational tape in addressing its most specific area of concern, and its formal construction and use of the PBS style is part of that effectiveness. At the same time, definite limits to the analysis appear within the piece. In his next major video, *TONGUES UNTIED*, Riggs found an expanded form for addressing complex contradictions.

TONGUES UNTIED: THE PASSION AT THE MARGINS

TONGUES UNTIED is perhaps best defined as an experimental essay or an editorial opinion tape. It explains the various situations of black gay men, and addresses that audience directly, sounding a call to action, to no longer be silent, to band together, to speak out, and to organize in their self-interest. For viewers who are not African American homosexual men, the tape permits an experience of directly hearing and seeing their concerns. And its power for this secondary set of

viewers distinctly derives from the use of first person expression. Rather than assuming the dispassionate stance of a mainstreaming format, TONGUES UNTIED makes its case directly by speaking of the pain and the pride of being black and gay. The tape's goal is to celebrate "Black men loving black men." To do this, it uses a variety of forms which are native to black culture and especially to black gay culture. For its primary audience the tape provides the pleasure of recognition, but for its secondary audience it provides a series of lessons about cultural context and political expression.

TONGUES UNTIED begins with an incantation as several voices repeatedly chant, "Brother to brother." Fading up from a black screen, we see slow motion images of groups of black men in public spaces such as basketball courts. The slow motion makes their casual glances at each other and gestures of touching and high fiving more significant than usual. But these images juxtaposed against the voice track make it clear that the male bonding depicted also covers black men's immense experience of anger and hurt in U.S. culture. A voice over narrator tells us, in meeting other black gay men:

"I am more likely to muse about my latest piece or so-and-so's party at Club Chi-chi than about the anger and hurt I felt that morning when a jeweler refused me entrance to his store because I am black and male and we are all perceived as thieves. I will swallow that hurt and should I speak of it will vocalize only the anger and say 'I should have bust out his windows'..."

The images here change from extreme close ups of men's faces to TV news footage of the summer '89 Virginia Beach incidents where black fraternity men in the resort community were beaten by aggressive cops and broke store windows in turn. The voices multiply, and intertitles make more connections about black men's shared rage: Howard Beach; Virginia Beach; Yusef Murder, CRACK; AIDS; BLACK MEN; Endangered Species?

Silence is a way to grin and bear the burden. By starting with the experience and pain of silence, Riggs speaks to a pervasive experience of African American people in the U.S.: men, women, children, straight and gay. Knowing that some form of punishment, retaliation, and humiliation is the likely response for speaking out against oppression and injustice, blacks learn early on to be silent for self-protection. As Paul Laurence Dunbar put it in a classic poem,

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.
— from "We Wear the Mask," 1896

The pairing of silence/invisibility and the relation of that pair to the couplet hurt/anger forms one of the most fundamental tropes of black culture and African American life experience. Because TONGUES UNTIED starts like this, referring to a virtually universal experience among African Americans, it provides initial access to the entire argument of the tape.

The titles come up and we then see Marlon Riggs naked in black void (though we don't know it's Riggs at this point) while the audio track continues to refer to silence. The tape begins to make an argument against silence, calling it a shield, a cloak, a sword-one that cuts both ways. The narrator calls for speaking out for one's self, finally revealing, "now that I have faced death," asking for an initiation while we see men kiss.

The mood drastically shifts from the dark limbo space to a brightly lit room. The camera pans across the body of a man calling a phone sex line. In a comic fantasy, suddenly the phone line is transformed. The caller seeks a "BGA," (black gay activist) for very safe sex and activist tasks such as licking envelopes. From this comic transition, the tone changes to stories of resistance, starting with the snap. Snapping, or finger popping, is a characteristic gesture in the black gay male community. It is often begun with a broad, flamboyant wave of the arm, ending in the snap, but there are endless varieties, and at a later point variations are shown. [7]

Illustrations of snaps continue with another storyteller in a black limbo who relates how on a Washington, D.C. bus ride, two brothers at the back of the bus began loudly quarrelling about which of the pair was "the bitch." As the bus goes along, filling with more commuters, the argument becomes more and more pronounced until finally one of them declares, "I'm a 45 year old black gay man who enjoys, enjoys, taking dick in his rectum! I'm not your bitch. (snap!) Your bitch is at home with your kids." (Snap! Snap!)[8]

The next story tells of a group of black men going to a new club and being insulted by the doorman who obviously didn't want to admit them. This story ends with resistance,

"Three pieces of ID? (Snap! Snap! Snap!) She didn't know what hit her! We took our money and left. The next day I reported that dive to the mayor's office, the human rights commission, the NAACP, and the Alice B. Toklas Democratic Club. Don't mess with a snap diva! (punctuated with snaps)"

The tape then goes on comically to illustrate various snaps (some courtesy of the Institute of Snap!thology), which provide both a comic lightening of the mood and a documentation of a unique gesture in black gay subculture.

The story of being hassled at a bar provides a hook for the black straight audience in that they too have most likely experienced this kind of social discrimination. The tape thus provides key moments of engagement for its secondary audience. This explains some of the tape's power — it provides a multiplicity of ways to relate to, to get into, the subject at hand if one is willing to listen. It also helps explain the fact that TONGUES UNTTED has been successful with many different audiences. However the main vehicle for engaging straights, and whites, is Marlon Riggs' own story.

In his personal narrative, shot with a tight close up of his face, Riggs begins talking about childhood sexuality, and how, although all the little boys played at sex with each other, he was different in that the others traded giving and receiving, while he just gave it away. Later he came to understand that this unthought and

spontaneous activity was actually socially condemned as he learned the terms, "punk", "faggot," "freak," and "homo." Riggs' testimony sets up the major theme of social/political constriction through language.

He then goes on to talk about how he was one of a few black students chosen to integrate a school in Georgia. As a result he was called a "Tom" by local blacks, suspicious of his relative achievement. He was also called a "Motherfuckin' Coon" by local whites, and greeted at school with "Nigger Go Home." He became totally alienated in the process. Visually this story uses extreme closeups of lips speaking the words: finally a rapid montage of slurs and insults, directed against Riggs' being black and homosexual, which surrounded his transition from child to adult. He explains that he withdrew into himself in response to these labels he never sought. The effect of this sequence for all audiences is very powerful, for almost everyone in the audience can recall facing anxieties and doubts in adolescence. Many sympathize with the eighth grader facing hostile schoolmates shouting racist comments, but the compounding of the identification by adding homophobic terms calls for a new leap of imaginative acceptance for many. This sequence demonstrates how Riggs uses first person voice. Stylistically and politically it provides a formal possibility for documentary to fulfill an increasingly necessary (on practical, theoretical, and political levels) demand to express gender/sexuality, race and class issues simultaneously and in their fully articulated complexity.

By this point in the tape it has: displayed much of its basic strategy: dealing with a complicated interweaving of black culture and gay culture in terms of verbal language and nonverbal gesture. Black subculture in the U.S. is verbalized by those artists who must "mouth with myriad subtleties," who often follow the lead of the African American folklore figure of the Signifying Monkey, a adroit trickster who endlessly talks himself into and out of trouble, and whose most obvious current commercial cultural manifestation is found in the range of Rap music. As a marginalized subculture, gay culture shares many structural similarities with black culture. But the differences are also significant. Since gays are not identified by physical characteristics and do not share in a common subculture from birth, the making of gay communities takes place among people who are themselves very diverse in class, ethnicity, region, age, etc. Almost all gays and lesbians can choose to pass for straight, while relatively few blacks have the option of passing for white.

In forming gay culture, then, people must find ways of identifying each other, and one of the most central ways this happens is through the creation and re-creation of distinctive language and gesture (clothing, grooming, taste in arts and recreation, are also frequently important clues). The commonplace is accentuated in a way to multiply its meanings. Thus irony, particularly an ironic self-awareness which plays with the arbitrary and artificial nature of language and gesture as social constructions, becomes an important and heightened form of expression. Camp attitude, in the broadest sense, expresses this complexity. For black gay men, participating in two subcultural frameworks at once, discourse is always contradictory: silence/invisibility is compounded by the possibilities of heightened expression as a form of resistance. And poetry becomes one of the supreme forms of that expression.

The complexity of race and gender issues is further developed in the next two sections. First we see an example of gay bashing ending with the victim prostrate

on the ground after being attacked by a group (black on black). This passage substantially ups the ante by moving from verbal insult to displaying the threat of direct physical violence against gays. Here the sound track moves from percussive music to poetry relating an incident, with a visual and audio dissolve to Roberta Flack singing, "The first time ever I saw your face..." while we see a school yearbook photo of a young white man. The image increases in screen size while Riggs narrates, telling how within his school experience this person became his friend, and although they were not lovers, what a blessing it was to feel passion and what a curse that a white boy provided it. This section may well be very unsettling to blacks, for it indicates that at least some of the time the black community itself cannot take care of its own, provide the emotional sustenance to survive oppression, and in fact may be the source of considerable pain — "Tom!"

If the African American community stands partially indicted in the previous section, the white gay community receives its share of criticism in the next section as Riggs details his later move to San Francisco's gay ghetto: "...cruising white boys, I played out adolescent dreams." At that time, he adds, he tried not to notice what few black images were available; we see racist caricatures of mammies, studs, and slaves. He concludes that finally he realized he was an invisible man here and quit the scene.

In finding the space to be openly gay, he loses his black identity. This marks a major break in terms of the rhythm of TONGUES UNTIED and the next section serves to provide a space for reflection as well as a further complication around issues of identity. A transvestite appears, smoking a cigarette in slow motion, while the soundtrack plays a melancholy blues, Billie Holiday singing "Lover-man, where can you be?" then a second transvestite in street drag — clothing flashy enough to get you noticed, and probably noticed for cross dressing — accompanied by Nina Simone in a slow version of "Black is the color of my true love's hair," and a first person poem about choosing to dress as a woman. Appropriating black women's blues, detailing emotional sensitivity, provides a lull for considering black men in drag as fully a part of the community.

Here and throughout the tape, Riggs provides a kind of time-release capsule in dealing with issues. Something is presented, alluded to, or hinted at, and then is referred to again at a different point in a different context. Depictions are sometimes detached from interpretations and viewers are called on to make imaginative leaps to connect the different points. Or sharp contrasts of style or mood bring different issues into focus or relation to each other.

The problem of homophobia in the black community is presented boldly as a shock cut response to the preceding drag image: "Abomination!" and a close up of a preacher's hand slamming down on a Bible — the Word institutionalized. The black political activist argues that with the homosexual, you can't tell which side he's on: black or gay. Riggs responds: as if you could somehow separate the two. Another says a gay man is no kind of a role model for kids. Again Riggs articulates the effect of such prejudice: to withdraw into silence. Excerpts from Eddie Murphy's notoriously homophobic stage routines follow, along with clips from the step show in Spike Lee's SCHOOL DAZE with the political activists stepping to the beat of repeated insults: "Fag, Fag, Fag." With a sad irony, Riggs notes this is what is produced by the "talented tenth." A subsequent montage equates the bigoted

statement, the abusive insult, and the homophobic joke with violent bashing of gays (repeating the earlier visuals), inextricably linking verbal attack with physical assault.

The response, we hear, with a slow drum beat in background, like a heartbeat, is silence and anger. This section marks the most complicated visual/verbal montage of the tape to this point. By use of a voice-over off screen Riggs gives the response, and by use of an image of a silent face (Essex Hemphill, whose poetry is prominent in the tape), gives room to mark the wound, the impact of the remark on an actual human being. This passage in the tape is dense with contradiction. To paraphrase: if not being openly attacked, one is tolerated only if silent; black gay men will sometimes laugh at the homophobe's joke if only to share in the identity gained by being die lowest of the low.

At the same time, this part of the tape re-articulates the experiences of silence and anger for black gay men. And those responses and experiences are, emotionally, perhaps their strongest shared experience with black straight men. In other words, if the oppression that all black men face in U.S. culture results in silence and anger, black gay men bear an additional burden, but one which is fundamentally emotionally similar to the experience of black heterosexual males. Hemphill's face, silent, unchanging, in close up, looks at the camera/audience with the face that white police and other agents of social control would call "sullen," and provides the visual reference for a complex relay of accusations which finally turn back at the viewer. Again and again the tape repeats this device of showing a face, registering it as visual fact, while a voice over either situates it or provides an interior monologue. Riggs' own image appears in a variety of lightings and framing, each change reminding us of a different facet of his narrative. The tension between sound track and visual track produces and reproduces the cultural situation of black gay men: the dominant discourse of white and heterosexual culture tries to place them outside of culture, beyond the pale, to make them invisible and silent. Resistance must begin with speech, with a counter discourse. Movement from interior monologue to public speech, from the space of one's self to public space, is the final momentum of the tape.

Another first person story details internalized oppression. It begins with a story of self-denial, of how, walking in the white gay ghetto, the speaker (Riggs) avoided looking at another black gay man. As they approached each other walking, both averted their gaze. Unable, unwilling to recognize the anger, the pain, the silence, which they shared, both sought avoidance. A chant begins: "Anger unvented... becomes pain unspoken... becomes rage released... becomes violence, cha cha cha."

A new speaker, Steve Langley, arrives to urge you, if you're economically and/or emotionally coming up short, to "snatch what's yours from the universe." From this point on the tape urges positive responses to the situations it has described. Dance, music, and dress are portrayed as expressive arts which help define and further a gender/sexual and racial identity. First, in a section that introduces voguing, we find a group of black gay men sharing dinner conversation in a restaurant (with House music under). The basics of vogue are introduced: that it is a dance form developed by black and Puerto Rican men; that its dancers imitate the styles and gestures and poses of high fashion models, including photo posing and runway display; that people form groups called houses which then show a fashion

allegiance to a clothing design company — the house of Chanel, etc. While several performers are shown in their routines, a poem is read to a mother, confessing a son's gay desires and identity.

Vogue appropriates images and style from haute couture for a street based culture of resistance. For the dispossessed to "snatch what's theirs from the universe" is to appropriate from the dominant culture, from the mass culture images of fashion in *Vogue*, and to turn those images to their own use. This essentially postmodern appropriation, a cultural scavenging or thrift shop image recycling, brings together two distinct yet overlapping patterns of cultural resistance. African American culture from slave times on perpetuates itself within certain limits imposed by the oppressor (such as restrictions on specific movements in dancing) and maintains continuity with its African origins. At the same time it freely trades in available cultural processes from the dominant culture, such as European musical instruments.

Gay culture too has often had a stance of reflection/ refraction toward the dominant culture, taking over selected parts of it in a way that allows a creative distortion (for example, the enthusiasm in part of gay male culture for opera with its emotional exaggeration, or for some the camp appreciation of Mae West or Joan Crawford, or among others the hypermasculinity of motorcycle culture imagery). As subcultures which freely appropriate from the dominant culture, African American and gay male cultures are always borrowing and changing for their own purposes. The complexity of this activity also provides many different entries into the subculture's symbolic communications for both insiders and outsiders. And in turn this allows for the rapid reappropriation of the appropriated, as Madonna's recent video "Vogue," borrows and hyperaestheticizes street voguing images into high production value, high fashion, and commercial het entertainment. What on the street is an ironic appropriation by the dispossessed, carrying a contradictory message of admiration and critique, is emptied of the cutting side of its criticism when vaulted into the mainstream, although it remains somewhat subversive in its new mainstream context.[9]

The theme of men in groups continues with dancers in a park. This imagery is crossed with a passing visual reference to a black boy dancing, imagery from an early silent film. This makes a somewhat enigmatic statement, perhaps signifying the difference between the boy dancing for the amusement of whites and these men in a group moving for their own pleasure and celebration. But there is no need to interpret the imagery. Here and at various other points in the tape, Riggs makes visual and verbal and musical allusions which remain stated but not explained.

A bar appears as another space of male bonding, a place where black gay men can look at others with desire as well as recognition. Using slow motion posterized images, this section reprises "Black is the color..." as instrumental music while another poem is heard. Further group expressions appear with a four-man doo wop group doing a fine song which has a nice irony: "Hey, boy, can you come out tonight?" The invitation to romance and to the open expression of gay identity turns the dominant culture's heterosexual expectations about men singing love songs upside down in a way that is comic and loving at the same time. The editing of both sound and image becomes more complex here. Having followed the piece this far, the audience increasingly finds references to many simultaneous levels of

reference and understanding. From the sweet tender love song the soundtrack segues into the chant, "Black, Black, Black, Black! Gay, Gay, Gay, Gay!" and we see the source, black men marching together with banners in a gay pride parade. (Actually the chant is similar in form to the earlier scene snatched from SCHOOL DAZE of the homophobic chant, but here the meaning is totally reversed.)

The mood changes again to poetry which supplies invitations to love making and images of men undressing, caressing, and kissing. But as this set of sensual fantasies proceeds, we are brought up short with a reminder of AIDS: "never think of a fuck." And Hemphill's warning about the danger and fear of physical sex in the present underlines the anxiety ("this nut might kill us") that often forces men to deny their physical desires and emotional needs. As we see a series of obituary photos and headlines of black men, we hear Riggs: "I discovered a time bomb ticking in my blood." The last photo is his own image. "I listen for my own quiet implosion." His image dissolves into others, of heroes such as Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass and finally the sequence comes to a complex montage of Martin Luther King marching in civil rights demonstrations cross cut with the black gay pride marchers, as Riggs' voice explains his own resolve, his own move from silence to speaking. The tape thus ends with a movement into history, a placing of the individual within history. The adolescent boy, silenced when he became the first to take an historic step and integrate a white school in Georgia, has become the man who finds his voice through the community of black gay men and who has the commanding ability to express that in the video we are watching. A call to action sounds: "Black men loving black men is *the* revolutionary act."

This last point in the tape has become controversial in its reception. By its placement at the end, appearing in print as intertitles, and then repeated by a chorus of voices, and being phrased in the affirmative/imperative, the tape seems to privilege same race homosexual relations. At least that's how many viewers have taken it, including Cary Alan Johnson in a review in *Gay Community News*, who complained, in an otherwise very positive review, that it was deceptive for Riggs to make this claim, and to imply that he had left behind days of being attracted to white men when he had a white lover in the present.[10] This comment brought a heated retort from Essex Hemphill in a subsequent issue of the newsweekly, with the poet denouncing the reviewer for narrowness,[11] and a more extended discussion of the issues by Riggs in an interview with Phil Harper.[12] Riggs has also addressed the issue in a later interview with Lyle Ashton Harris.[13] While Riggs argues for a broader, desexualized, interpretation of the slogan, the work doesn't force this interpretation, and through narrowing its focus to images of black men with black men in both social and erotic situations in the second half, after Riggs has declared that he finally left the white gay ghetto, it seems to validate racial bonding and erotic attraction at the same time. Also, there is a reprise of the image of Riggs being caressed and kissed by a black man shortly before the slogan is given. Whatever Riggs intended, he chose to leave out information that many find important.

Clearly the issue is complex enough that it demands its own space for discussion (and the Hemphill retort and the subsequent interviews by Riggs are a good starting point for that dialogue). Riggs has elaborated:

"This is what I am addressing at bottom: So many of the reasons that

prohibit us from growing, from healing, from being free are that we hate each other and we hate ourselves as black gay men. As black men, period. You see it in the statistics, you see it in the knifings and the shootings, the dropouts and the fathers' abandonments. If you acknowledge your own humanity, your own worth, you acknowledge it in relation to somebody else — we do not live in voids. And so you are forced to realize the human potential in others. ...For me the revolution will occur not when white people are overthrown but rather when we can say to ourselves, 'I love who I am, I love my blackness, my maleness. What I am is whole and beautiful, and really wonderful,' and when we come to terms with each other and say, 'I love you.' ... Until we heal on a basic level, a cultural psychological, and communal level, we will never achieve freedom; we will always be a sick people. Those are hard words, because they play into what other people consider part of the pathology of the black community. Yet we do need to acknowledge that — for reasons different from those the white conservative ideologues claim — there is sickness in our community and come to terms with it. We have to begin to heal ourselves by going through all the doors that we have locked and tried to forget about — the doors of slavery, the doors of homophobia, of internalized racism, of shame about being black. A lot of that remains hidden and becomes art of the subtext of all our actions toward each other." [14]

The structure and form of *TONGUES UNTIED* allows for the introduction of many more issues than does *ETHNIC NOTIONS*. In comparison *TONGUES UNTIED* is much denser and richer in its allusions and analysis. At the same time, it must be said that not everyone viewing it will have essentially the same or even a similar experience. Some people just shut down at one point or another. In a classroom screening, one student asked out loud, "Is that a man?" on seeing the transvestite on the street and, shocked that it was, refused to watch the section. This is only a more extreme example of what the tape does continually, which is to provide many subjective "hooks" into the piece that not everyone will pick up on. The tape's density — using rapid changes within specific poems as well as strong contrasts between one passage and another as well as the contrast of image against word or sound — encourages a diversity of response. The audience is invited to do a kind of postmodern sampling of the tape. A second or third viewing brings forward new aspects of the tape's argument, and also makes clearer the relation of Riggs as principal narrator to the diverse voices of different poets who are also represented in the work. Riggs is not trying to make his own condition of testing HIV positive a point on which a major understanding in the tape turns. That he has tested positive is a fact that explains some of the urgency and perhaps some of the direct plain spokenness of the tape. It's as if he were saying that at this point in his life he wants to get certain issues out clearly and unmistakably. Yet he also implicates, with a variety of different "hooks," different viewers on their own terms of experience: as black men, as gays, as people who are facing a possibly terminal condition, as people who have experienced racism, and so forth.

The knowledge needed to understand the entire range of the piece is considerable. The ideal viewer would know the face and reputation of Joseph Beams who was an important writer and editor of the first anthology of black gay male writing, *In the Life*, and source of the "Black men loving black men..." quotation, as well as pick up

on a visual reference to Isaac Julien's *LOOKING FOR LANGSTON*. At other points, such as the comic primer on snap, the tape teaches its audience all it needs to know. Similarly with the poems. Some of the writings speak directly of, from, and to black gay experience, leaving outsiders simply to register what's said, while others such as Essex Hemphill's invitation to love, "Black Beans," are lyrics open to anyone's understanding and appreciation. The poetry which motivated Riggs to begin the project, an outpouring of new wirings by black gay men forming a cultural identity in the 80s, provides the most efficient "hook" for all viewers of the tape. It is unmistakably framed within black cultural expression — in themes, vocabulary, syntax, rhythm and cadence. Yet it is also very easy to access for people outside that culture, principally because the first person address of much of it speaks directly to the audience.

TONGUES UNTIED does not cover all the issues of black gay men, nor is it able to explain all the details of what it does address. It seems strongly marked by men speaking from relatively stable urban experience. There's no speaking from the position of men in rural and small town situations, in the armed forces, in prison or on parole, or bound in the distress of alcoholism, drug addiction/recovery, or mental illness. It makes only the most passing allusions to the situations of gay men who are fathers and husbands. Stories of coming out, especially within one's family, are conspicuously absent.[15] It doesn't address the color line and class distinctions within the black gay community. And it doesn't offer a substantial critique of masculinity as found in both gay and straight forms, although such a critique is one of the major concerns of black women intellectuals over the past few decades.

But no work of 55 minutes length could adequately address all those issues, although subsequently, in various interviews Riggs has shown his acute sensitivity to other issues. For example, in the *Afterimage* interview with Harris he articulately argues for the importance of a variety of black women writers in developing an analysis of African American culture and politics. Making *TONGUES UNTIED* and participating in its subsequent reception has put Riggs in a distinct position of intellectual and political leadership. He was a major speaker at the annual Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Academic Conference held at his alma mater, Harvard, in fall 1990, and his address subsequently appeared *Outlook*. [16] His essay on Black Macho media was originally given at the Whitney Museum Conference, "African-American Film and Media Culture: A Re-examination." And within a few months of *TONGUES UNTIED*'s release, he became a celebrity in black gay culture, appearing in the celebrity columns of *BLX* and *Thing*. [17]

TONGUES UNTIED is one of the most sophisticated philosophical and political analyses of race, gender, and sexuality ever put on tape. Analytic and passionate, it marks the point from which further questions, further explorations, must be undertaken.

NOTES

1. Most of the kitsch was collected by Jan Faulkner, one of the two non-academic talking heads, and the end credits indicate that the collection was a starting point for the tape. Why this black woman collects these items is not addressed.
2. This is tricky ground, however. Star image can differ significantly from any one

particular role, and an actor's career over time must be taken into account with a figure like Foxx, who spent most of his career in black venues and doing blue material and late in life finally became a cross-over figure with the SANFORD AND SON show. (And is the *Cosby* show really any different except in class position of the sitcom dads?). One can easily make the case that Day (best remembered for his appearance in PURPLE RAIN and his music videos with his group The Time) is a self-ironic or postmodern buffoon. Mr. T's star image goes beyond just being the violent sidekick because he is also famous for celebrity public appearances encouraging kids to stay in school.

3. In U.S. culture, Jewish comedians provide an interesting reference point for such an investigation, and Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* contains copious examples in its discussion of self-protective humor.

4. "Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of a Snap! Queen," *The Independent: Film and Video Monthly*, 14:3 (April 1991), 32-34.

5. Audience reception analysis in general is now an area of considerable controversy with an older model of mass media as indoctrination being challenged by a relativist model which assumes people can and do read mass culture many different ways. The former position tends to be supported by print culture intellectuals, the latter by media culture intellectuals. For an interesting contrast consider James Baldwin's testimony of his childhood movie going experiences in *The Devil Finds Work* (NY: Dial. 1976), e.g.: "The only actor of the era with whom I identified was Henry Fonda, I was not alone. A black friend of mine, after seeing Henry Fonda in THE GRAPES OF WRATH, swore that Fonda had colored blood. You could tell, he said, by the way Fonda walked down the road at the end of the film: *white men don't walk like that!* and he imitated Fonda's stubborn, patient, wide-legged hike away from the camera." (p. 21).

6. It would be missing the point to fault the tape for not being uniform or theoretically consistent about this idea, which most critical cultural analysis today would discuss under the term "ideology." As a message for a general audience the tape works very well by stating this general concept several times in different ways using different terminology.

7. This folkloric gesture is not explained in other terms, but one black student told me that many African American mothers get their children's attention and scold them by extending an arm and snapping their fingers. The gestural language could be seen as the adaptation of a female gesture to a gay male subcultural expression, a transformation found in other aspects of gay male culture.

8. That the location is Washington is my deduction, but the story gains more resonance since mostly working class and lower middle class Black people ride the bus in that mostly black city. Thus the performance is one which is open to and for the black community. And it's also one that gives lie to the later articulated notion that somehow black gay men don't "belong" to the black community. The political point is important and worth elaborating. While a certain part of the white gay male community can and does choose to live in yuppie dominated gay ghettos, and while men of color can and do visit such places, by and large they don't live there. For one thing, because of the pervasive economic discrimination against blacks, most don't have as much money, and also they often have specific ties of

job, family, friendship, and community involvement in the African American community. For another thing, there's racism in the gay ghetto, just as in the society at large. In a way this produces different patterns of homophobia and discrimination in different communities. Middle class urban/ suburban straight whites can often see out of the closet white gay men as distinctly separate because spatially they live and recreate "elsewhere." In an urban environment where the different communities do abut or overlap, straights may well be not antagonistic when essentially sharing many of the same middle class white urban concerns about having a nice, clean, safe neighborhood. Homophobia in the white working class or the black community is often more clearly focused on specific individuals who are out in the community and openly articulated in name-calling and derogatory speech. The point being, that if there sometimes seems to be more open and overt homophobia in such communities, it is also the case that there may in fact be more overt interaction with and direct awareness of the "Other."

9. For an analysis of the complex contradictions in Madonna's star image, performance and videos: Ramona Curry, "Madonna — Pastiche or Parody?" *Journal of Film and Video*, 42:2 (Summer 90), pp. 15-30.

10. Johnson, "Not in Knots: TONGUES UNTIED is the Black Gay Official Story," *GCN*, Feb 25-Mar 3, 1990, p. 11.

11. Hemphill, "Choice," *GCN*, May 6-12, 1990, pp. 11, 13.

12. Harper. "Speaking Out about TONGUES UNTIED": An Interview with Videomaker Marlon Riggs," *GCN*, May 6-12, 1990, pp. 10-11, 13.

13. Harris, "Cultural Healing: An Interview with Marion Riggs," *Afterimage*, Mar 1991, pp. 8-11.

14. Hint, *Afterimage*, p. 11.

15. The importance of coming out stories in the creation of post-Stonewall gay and lesbian culture in North America is well-known. That this very importance might mark class and race privilege is a more recent insight.

16. Riggs. "Ruminations of a Snap Queen: What Time Is It?!" *Outlook: National Lesbian and Gay Quarterly*, no. 12 (Spring 91), 12-19.

17. Preston G. Guider, "Read My Lips." *BLK: The National Black Lesbian and Gay Newsmagazine*, 2:12 (Dec. 90), 27; "Thing Lists," *Thing* no. 4 (Spring 91), 14.

"TONGUES UNTIED is distributed by Frameline, San Francisco, and ETHNIC NOTIONS by California Newsreel, San Francisco.

For discussions that helped me clarify my ideas in this article, I like to acknowledge the help of José Arroyo, Gabriel Gomez, John Hess, Craig Koïs, Julia Lesage, Rick Maxwell, Grant McKernie, H. D. Motyl, Manji Pendakur, Mark Reid, and Tom Waugh. My interview with Marlon Riggs in November 1989, "Listening to the Heartbeat: An Interview with Marlon Riggs," accompanies this article. Part of the research and writing of this article was supported by fellowships from the University of Oregon Humanities Center and the Northwestern University School of Speech.

Interview with Marlon Riggs Listening to the heartbeat

by Chuck Kleinhans and Julia Lesage

from *Jump Cut*, no. 36, May 1991, pp. 119-126

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This interview was conducted by Chuck Kleinhans in Oakland CA in November 1989, with Marlon Riggs shortly after the premiere of Riggs' TONGUES UNTIED at the American Film Institute Video Festival. The interview was prepared in written form by Julia Lesage.

Chuck Kleinhans: TONGUES UNTIED has a strong personal sense, which the extensive use of poetry contributes to. Would you talk about your use of poetry and how that relates to your use of the first person and inclusion of yourself as a voice and screen presence in the tape?

Marlon Riggs: In a way all the poetry that was coming out by black gay men inspired TONGUES UNTIED. About two years before I made this, a number of voices had started to speak out in a very eloquent fashion and in a very different way from what you would expect. Around 1985-86 the primary means of expression for black gay men and a black gay identity was through poetry — using all forms and all kinds of expression. I saw one anthology after another of black gay voices in poetry, short stories, and experimental essay forms. All this seemed interesting material for a documentary.

I conceived of a video about poets, in particular about a black gay men's poetry workshop in New York, The Other Countries Workshop. The Other Countries collective gets together and reads *for* each other and then they undergo a sort of self criticism — of the group, of their work. Many members are first time writers, trying to get published; others are very experienced and have written a lot. I didn't know of anything like that, especially here on the west coast, and, in fact, not in many other places in the east. I was fascinated by this kind of collective support for a poetic form of expression.

TONGUES UNTIED began with wanting to do the poets. But that could only go so far before it got reduced to, "Yeah, poets, black gay poets, that's interesting and different, but a little boring." How do you make this subject matter visually compelling? What the people were saying was extremely compelling. How could I make the tape as visually, formally, and structurally compelling? I moved more and more towards a non-linear, non-traditional documentary. After a while, I even

abandoned the word "documentary," seeking my own sort of embodiment and expression in video to represent these voices, their visions, their words.

So I was really just looking at poems, especially those that dealt with being black and gay. Lots of black gay poetry deals with being black or alone or alienated. But it keeps being gay as a subtext — if you know the poet and you know the anthology, then you read it into it. I knew I needed to find poems which explicitly dealt with sexuality as well as race. I didn't want one or the other but the convergence of the two. To select things, I read through volumes and volumes and informally had people submit things to me — meeting this person and that, talking to people, in particular, talking to Essex Hemphill. Hemphill has probably published as much if not more than any other black gay poet in this country. His work moves me extremely just reading it, and it did so before I ever met or heard him.

I had had little affinity for poetry before this. The only poet I remember enjoying was Walt Whitman, to whom I was introduced in college. I never grew up with poetry around the house or read it or used it as a form of expression. But looking at these poems I really saw what was missing. So much of what our culture considers classic poetic form doesn't address my life, directly or even indirectly. Classical poetry is about a different culture, an oppressive and alienating culture, at least in relation to my own. For once, to have poetry speak directly to my own experience was very moving.

So I was talking with Essex, reading his poetry, reading poetry from the Other Countries anthology, meeting with those poets — some of whose work had not been published — and reading and listening. In some ways, I was very promiscuous, listening to and recording anything. At one point I didn't judge whether or not something was formally and structurally a "good" poem. Rather I asked, "What's its passion?" How clearly does it state longing and internalized conflict and a sense of wanting to struggle against that? Also, could I communicate that poem in a visual medium? Some poems are wonderful but so dense with metaphor and so quick in their juxtapositions that you can't make them work with images. I had to find poems which were almost conversational in structure and style, which I knew would work in video.

In turn, the poetry inspired my own writing. I had never written in a very poetic form, and now I was writing in freestyle — not haiku or couplets but in a very condensed form, looking at images as metaphor, selecting a few iconic words and phrases that would bring up reverberations and resonances in what viewers would see and think and feel. I wanted to use everything in the way the poems did, with words and phrases coded for the black community or the black gay community.

Other people would understand, for instance, the word "snap." There's nothing obscure about it. Yet, as with any culture, if it's something you do and it's part of your ritual, when you see it as an image, it has a very different meaning for you. I felt liberated to use a lot of material like that and in a very different context. I no longer felt constrained to ask, "Will other people get it? Will it make sense? Is my communication too closed?" Poetry liberated me to be condensed in style, to select things and talk almost in metaphor. The tape's structure was scripted, but I wanted to make every moment, syllable, and word count,

I didn't come to this tape's personal involvement easily. It's not in my training or

my nature or my personality. I've always hated being in front of a camera and have never even used my own voice before in a work. What really moved me to do it was the need to get at the issue of black gay men loving white gay men. Most of the writings I came across present the viewpoint of black men who love black men. They're critical of black men who love white men. But this always seems like an outsider's perspective, a critical judgment coming from somebody looking down on somebody else — who's seen in a way as betraying the race. This viewpoint might be satisfactory for black men who love black men, but for black men who are into white men, it'd provoke more defensiveness and denial than anything else.

I was looking for a strategy to keep people's defenses from going up, to allow them to hear and see and hopefully to reflect upon themselves, especially if they're in that situation. So I found myself pushed to reveal my own story. In some ways it makes it disarming for a black viewer to understand this paradox, to see someone who really believes in black culture, black life, and black history drawn in a very subconscious and, if you will, involuntary, way toward what some might consider your enemy, the opposition, or at least your alien — the other. How do you embody that in a way that makes it real and human and understandable and sympathetic, even to viewers who don't feel that? So they'd understand sympathetically or even empathetically what someone like that is going through?

To make this jump meant really a big leap of faith in myself — that I could do this and it'd work and it wouldn't be self-indulgent. In personal video and in personal expression in documentary, you always have to consider how far to go in your revelation. How much do you treat the camera as a diary, if you will? How much can you say before it becomes self-indulgent, boring and excessive? I worried, "Am I saying too much? What am I holding back?" It was still too sensitive for me because I didn't want to be judged on those terms. I constantly faced that struggle. After a while I stopped thinking about being judged. I said, "Well, since you put this much out here in terms of your life, you can't worry now about the little extra eighth of an inch you're about to give. By now people are with you or they've rejected you. You might as well go with it completely."

In this experimental form, I wanted an anchor. Not a dominant one-and-only point of view. There're a multiplicity of voices in the video, not just my voice. In fact, in terms of total time, the percentage of time with my voice is fairly small. But because I have such a dominant place at a pivotal point in the video, my viewpoint becomes, in a way, a thread throughout. And I hope that this sensibility gives the audience a sense of coherence and cohesion in terms of everything else said.

I have a problem with some experimental forms, which go from one visualized piece of poetry to another. Yes, they may all deal with black gay identity — different voices, different people — but almost like moving from one vignette to another with no clear relation. I understood this as a problem when first thinking about the video. How do I make connections among different actors, different voices, and different forms? It's not an easy unity. I was looking for that thread — which became me. It was a structural kind of function that it became me who would provide that sort of coherence. I didn't do it by stepping in as narrator: "Now you see what it looks like to be a vogue, child. Now you are seeing what the snap is." I wanted to provide a subtle undercurrent beneath the audio and image surface. The undercurrent is that there's a person whose journey you're going through, who

you're accompanying as other people talk about their lives. And it's not as if they are telling you everything. As other people are telling you things, you get both his and your encounter with these other people.

CK: The piece has a development that makes it seem like we're present in it. In its organization, it moves from one issue to another and enriches everything at each step. Things introduced early on are reflected upon in a very different context at a later point, and we've learned other things along the way. It was really remarkable at the end of it that I had the sense that I really knew a lot more about black gay men, yet they were not presented as a unity. It did not convey a sense of something like, "Oh, there's this category of black gay men, they all think alike and they all are alike." The tape made me understand that there's diversity around a set of issues and experiences, that those experiences are very different for different people. It is an incredibly difficult thing to express the complexity of any social group and to get viewers to realize, "There're things that pull us together but there's also diversity among us. You shouldn't just rest on the idea that once you have a label that you've explained something."

That was not only fascinating to me, but it gave me lots of ideas because I also make video. It was, "Oh, this is something I can steal from!"

MR: Don't feel bad. I do it all the time myself! Again, I was stealing left and right. I didn't care. I was promiscuous in terms of forms. Some filmmakers learn a certain discipline. For them, that's it. They try to apply it over and over, refining it some way. Somebody who came in once during my editing the rough-cut said, "That looks like MTV!" I answered, "I don't care if it looks like MTV. If it works, that's fine for me."

CK: Well, this is quite a change from ETHNIC NOTIONS in terms of voice, and whom you are explaining something to and what you were taking for granted. Yet you're also doing a continuation of ETHNIC NOTIONS.

MR: That's true. With ETHNIC NOTIONS, I was trying to communicate to a broad audience, the kind people write about in their grant proposals as "general audience." I wanted to communicate to a primary audience which was a large, multicultural, black, white, latino, asian, male, female, gay, straight, bisexual, whatever audience. It is important for everyone so understand how racial caricatures and stereotyping function as tools of socialization and social control.

First I had to assume that most viewers don't know much about U.S. history, so I had to re-inform viewers about the basic historical context for these images. And then I had to connect these images to real social consequences, so that viewers could see a relation between the image, for instance, of the black mammy and the opportunities previously afforded black women to work just as cooks, maids and housekeepers. I wanted to demonstrate the relations between image and social control.

Also, because these images work on such a deep subconscious level in our culture and have done so for so long, I was afraid to play with them. A playful, nontraditional, nonlinear, nonhistorical form could be easily misinterpreted. To have images coming this way and that, 1850s images thrown in with 1950s ones, and a sort of funny voice over poking fun at the images — such a style could have

been easily and justifiably interpreted as: "Well, you're saying that none of this is really serious. Either it's all behind us so we don't need to take it seriously anymore, or it's so well integrated in our lives and we understand it so well that we can laugh about it." I didn't feel that either of those interpretations was the case. The tape required a certain gravity, a certain scholarship, if you will, a certain sense of authority in speaking about those images.

And it required a sort of unity or consensus of voice about what those images mean. Given the audience I wanted to reach, I faced a set of real constraints in terms of what people knew and how they would interpret the material. I already knew some common reactions when people saw the images. They were either totally blown away and shocked and disgusted, or they'd look at a little figurine of a black child eating a watermelon and say, "Isn't that cute?" I realized I had to walk a fairly narrow and straight line; otherwise, things could really go awry. A more experimental, quirky or eccentric form would have deeply and rightly offended an audience that wants to understand the weight of these images in our culture and how much such images have held us down in terms of racism and discrimination and oppression. It was not an unconventional piece at all. Only the content made it different.

In TONGUES UNTIED, I was not dealing with history, or at least a tradition of historical scholarship rooted in physical evidence. The history in TONGUES UNTIED is phrased more in terms of the context of understanding a culture. And I use it in a kind of advocacy role, placing black gay men within the overall historical context of black struggle in this country. I was also dealing with personal expression, my own and that of the other poets. That was liberating, too. The rules about getting the facts right or the correct interpretation of history no longer applied. Actually I now believe this other form of expression is true for conveying history, too (though at the time I didn't).

In TONGUES UNTIED I was dealing with the weaving, in terms of our lives, where truth, fiction, fantasy, fact, history, mythology really interweave to inform our character, psyche, values and beliefs. Changing my mind about traditional history has been part of my evolution. Before I considered history and mythology, fact and fiction as separate and obviously discreet. Now I don't think so in terms of how they inform us and work within us to make us who and what we are as individuals and as a culture, as a group, race, and nationality.

Without these constraints I not only could express a very different content but had room to play with form. I could experiment in a way that even might confuse some viewers. Since my intended primary audience was really focused on black gay men, I didn't mind if everybody got it. It was important that everybody got the point of ETHNIC NOTIONS. Frankly, with TONGUES UNTIED if white heterosexuals don't understand the reasons why black people are angry and just consider this piece militant, then so be it. I'm not going to take time to justify this for people for whom this experience is totally alien. TONGUES UNTIED is an affirmation of the feelings and experiences of black gay men, made for them by a black gay man, or actually by black gay men because the piece has a number of voices. If others understand, fine, but making sure everyone understands was not my prerequisite in making this.

Audience is very important to me, but in terms of thinking critically about who

your audience is and how you intend to reach them. Who are your other potential audiences and how they might read your work? Are they as important as your primary audience? It's very important to think about those issues before actually constructing your work because it affects what you do and the decisions you make.

CK: What has been the response so far? I know it's only been fifteen days since its premiere.

MR: Phenomenal. I really never expected it quite like this. Before its first showing at the American Film Institute Video Festival, I was in the editing room day and night. I didn't have work-in-progress screenings to gauge people's responses. I was fairly isolated, just trying to finish this — because when school got started again, I wouldn't have an editing room and students would be coming in asking questions. If I didn't finish it now, I wouldn't until sometime next year. Editing was really a focused and intense time, just trying to make things work. I had an image in my mind, which worked when I saw the reels in my head. I was trying to make the editing tape conform to that. Then the first showing was at the AFI Video Festival to an audience that really was not my intended primary audience. To have people react so wonderfully was a shock.

I thought, if people liked it because of its strange form, I'd be appreciative, but I'd gauge the real response a few weeks from then when I could show it to gay black men. But I found it extremely heartwarming to have the content, that is, the black gay experience and my expression of it, transcend being a message to black gays and speak to others who have also felt alienated, outcast, silenced, and for me to see how they could understand the piece's reverberations on that level.

I've had a second screening here at the Film Arts Festival with a packed, sold-out crowd at the Roxy Theater in San Francisco. It was just amazing. I was on edge, facing a hometown crowd including some of TONGUES UNTIED's participants who'd never seen the video before. I was anxious and wondering, "What are they going to think? Did I get the credits and names spelled right?" I worried about all the little minutia, not really able to enjoy the flow. "Are they getting this? Are they going to laugh now?" I couldn't tell. I was so keyed up that it wasn't until afterwards when people stood up and gave a standing ovation (I hear it was the only one at the festival) that I realized that people were really responding. Especially when I got outside and everyone was coming up, a friend said, "I'm not a black man. I'm not a gay man. I'm a straight, white, Jewish woman. But I understood what you see and what you meant and what you were saying, and I loved it!"

The response came because the piece said something that hadn't been said before, but also TONGUES UNTIED said it with such passion. There's no yelling and screaming throughout the piece; it doesn't rant or rave or rage against white people. It's not that kind of piece. But there's passion suffused throughout. The feeling and emotion, as well as the personal revelation seem to have touched people. TONGUES UNTIED is still in its infant years, actually infant weeks. We'll see if it can stand on its two legs soon and face the world.

CK: I want to use it in a class that I'll be teaching on at mass culture and subcultures. We're looking at how subcultures use and borrow from mass culture, taking things over from mass culture for themselves. I saw that kind of

appropriation happening again and again on the tape and I was really fascinated with the section on voguing. Historically, black intellectuals were concerned about this process. DuBois wrote about the significance of spirituals, looking beyond how the songs promote resignation and getting a reward in heaven to stress their resistance represent oppression. Richard Wright explained black culture by seeing this element of resistance in the blues where often outsiders have really misunderstood it.

MR: Or understanding it, have tried to distort it.

CK: Again and again the tape shows this kind of appropriation, which intrigues me. I want to demonstrate to my students how a subculture forms a cultural identity and how it can make powerful assertions about itself in a way that outsiders do not see. Or if they do observe it, they don't understand it very well, especially what function it has.

MR: This tape is partly about community-building. It's an affirmation of some of the things that we as black gay men take for granted. For example, lots of people snap. They snap on every syllable, and they don't think about it. You can go from Mississippi to California to New York and this cultural form will be recognized — there will be a response. Some people are ashamed about snap because they look at it and think, "Oh, we know he's a gay man." Yet, snap is also a form of resistance, a form of saying, "Yes, I'm different and I'm also proud of it." And there's that kind of resistance and affirmation throughout the tape — the voguing, the dancing, the deliberately so-called-effeminate gestures in voguing. You need a way to separate and deliberately distinguish yourself. You need somehow to affirm those gestures which the dominant culture looks down upon and considers inferior or reflecting a flawed personality or a flawed culture. We take that and reverse it in a way, so that it becomes a virtue rather than a vice or flaw.

Again, popular, black American dancing is so much a part of our culture, yet unfortunately some people are ashamed to dance within a public setting. "White folks will see us and will think, well, we're always happy, dancing darkies." But you have to look at it on your own terms, from your own standard and not continually from eyes of blue. Look through your own eyes and realize that that is a form of cultural resistance, community building and cultural affirmation. If you do that, then you dance as liberation. In the dance sequence that follows the voguing sequence, after you've seen men vogueing singly, you see an entire group of men dancing in the park. It's very brief, but it's a very strong moment. What might seem like, oh yeah, black folks dancing, you've looked right at it and now you're seeing it not just as dancing but as resistance and as liberation. In the tape, it's become a way of finding your way back to community, when you might have been lost within competing notions of alienation either because you dance for whites, or you do or don't dance, or whatever. Now in a way it means finding your way back to your roots, finding a way to an identity which is not just individually affirmed but culturally and socially affirmed.

CK: Another thing that I liked is the doo-wop singing in four-part harmony.

MR: I deliberately wanted to take the cultural forms that are part of the black community, that are very well-respected and well-loved, that in some ways are deemed classic cultural forms. It might be dancing or singing, here it's four-part

doo-wop harmony. (I actually had wanted to do rap, a black gay rap, as well, but I couldn't get that together. Maybe it'll come in the future.) My goal was to take those things which in some ways have become very much enshrined in traditional popular culture, black American popular culture, and infuse them with something just a little bit different. In this case, a black gay aspect. Viewers can be simultaneously hooked and repulsed: "Boy, can that child sing! He's talking about black men loving black men." I'm playing with such conflicted reactions throughout TONGUES UNTIED. The marching, the civil rights protests interwoven with black gay men marching in gay rights marches, the black-gay-doo-wop love song. All of these things sort of snap, like the rhythm and rhyming of rap. We're talking about something that's in black gay expression. All the time I'm playing with traditional forms, yet altering them, perhaps innovating them because of this infusion of a black gay expression.

CK: Another thing I responded to very strongly because I see people actually having these experiences was the story on the bus where a man just totally dramatically takes over a public space and insists on his gay presence at the risk of bodily harm, if someone wants to go after him. These are kinds of incidents that the straight world does know about, Yet there's this way in which, rhetorically, when straights talk, they'll act as if they don't know anything about gay culture, or that they've never met gay people, or there're only "them" out there in the media or only those people in the Castro, or something like that. As if in their own community they've never had this experience. I know you haven't had any chance to hear many reactions but it seems risky even admitting that children...

MR: That children have sex?

CK: It's one of those things that people often don't want to hear or think about, even if they know it. Since it comes after the bus story, it seemed in a similar vein — things that people know about but often repress. Anyone who has ever raised a child or been a child knows that children have sexuality, yet culturally it gets obliterated. And people know that there are black gays but that gets obliterated, too.

MR: It's strange, it never seemed like a risk. Perhaps it's a personal revelation, but it didn't seem such a big thing. At least in Fort Worth, Texas, as I was growing up, many friends talked about having sex at age six or seven or eight. You're not having, wow, adventurous sex, but you're experimenting. It is not that unusual in the black community, nor is it to admit what you liked. It was okay if you had sex with boys as long as you were the one on top, because then you were still a man or a boy. Only when the position was reversed were you like "cheap pussy," if you will. The term — to conquer the pussy — I obviously did not use in the tape. But these things were truths.

I decided that what I was going to deal with were in some ways explosive yet deeply repressed things in our community. Whether it was taking on the church, or taking on Eddie Murphy, or taking on child sexuality and child sex (children having sex, not just having sexual feelings but actually engaging in copulation). That would have to be done. It was either say nothing or go all out. I'd just have to take those risks and see how people react. I speak from within the black community, to which the tape is primarily directed. In the black community as well as in our society overall, there are things that we just don't deal with. We like to keep up a pretense

that certain things aren't happening, certain knowledge is not known, certain behavior never occurs. Yet all of these things do go on. In this one area, I wanted to lift the lid and speak: "Yes, this happens. You can deal with it in a different way, but you will no longer deal with it by silence or deal with it by avoidance and oppression."

This acknowledgement is confrontational for some, I imagine, depending on where they're coming from. I haven't had that reaction yet, but the tape's been shown to sympathetic audiences. I will learn very shortly when we show it in a sociology class, which has a large latino and black population, not people who are particularly gay or progressive. We'll see how students react to them. I know it will be very different and threatening.

CK: Would you say a little about the section with the transvestite walking by the lake and your choice of music.

MR: The Nina Simone and Billie Holiday sections follow my voyage of trying to find self-in-community within the Castro (San Francisco's so-called gay mecca) and not finding it. In fact, I found just the opposite, what I'd already known, racism, hatred and bigotry. It was much more nuanced, much more subtle than what I'd found in the south growing up, but very present and obvious to me. As a transition in the tape, I drop my story and do not follow a conventional narrative, which would be to indicate when I say I left the Castro in search of someplace better, to show me someplace else. This confuses some viewers and I realize was a risk. The narrative line now moves into other stories, other identities which are much like my own. Not exactly, I've never been a drag queen, attracted to drag queens or dressed in drag as experimentation. Rather, I bridged this experience with my own, so that after you hear me saying, "I left the Castro obviously longing for something better," you hear a Billie Holiday song: "I don't know why, but I'm feeling so sad. I long to try something I never had. Lover man, where can you be?" If you follow this metaphor, the lover man is not just a lover to sleep with but also lover-man community, friends, fellows, fellowship — where can you be? The image is one many people would find repulsive, a street drag queen, obviously rough-looking, not someone elegantly dressed with fine coiffured hair and makeup. You have to look at the humanity within that person and see that the experience which moved by my telling my story now applies to this person. And it's just through her gestures, her look, her sitting there that I was hoping that this empathy would be communicated.

Part of this sequence is personal. I love Billie Holiday and Nina Simone. I grew up with these songs. To use them means bringing up stuff from my past, I played those songs over and over as a kid and listened to them as my parents played them. That's partly why my own Nina Simone album is so scratched but I don't care if it's not perfect sounding. At age ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, I felt so lonely. Listening to this music kept me thinking that there must be something better than this. In the tape I used those songs as personal reflections from my life, which would hopefully bridge this identity to these very different people. Transvestites are different from myself and very different from most people we're seeing. Lots of men, even gay men, are repulsed by drag queens, consider them inferior and look upon them as caricatures, not seeing anything beyond the surface. That means looking upon transvestites in the way the straight community looks upon black

gays or all gay men. I used this music to try to overcome that distance, to make these people real and their grief, longing, and needs as respectable and noble and as sympathetically felt by an audience as what was understood from my own story.

The Nina Simone song was one I had always loved. I played over and over as a kid and teenager the way some people played Beatles' songs or the Fifth Dimension or the Temptations. I'd pick up the record and play it again and again: "Black is the color..." I'd listen to Simone's voice tremble, it'd get so soft and it was so filled with I didn't know then why that song had such strong feeling and meaning for me. Now I look back and see obviously why. Her voice is androgynous and could almost play as a man's voice: "Black is the color of my true love's hair .. his hands ...his face" — it's obviously male gender here. That was before I knew I was gay and my response was not about a man talking about a woman. I had this sort of involuntary response to that song which really built up over the years.

I guess I'm very much like many gay men in that some women vocalists are the people whom I most admire and who speak what I feel. When I was looking for another copy, it was tough to find that particular album. My parents have the original and theirs was too scratched up to use.

I came across Essex's poem, "A Homicide," about a very different experience, about a black drag queen being murdered. But I didn't interpret it in that way. When I looked at the line, "His grief is not apparel. It is a wig it does not rest gently on my head," or when he's talking about, "I look, I search the waterfronts for the man I love," those words have a very different meaning for me. They are about community, longing, need, love, the need for love and affirmation, and are not just about grief. In this sequence in the tape, the song, those words, and that image which I wanted to humanize for people worked.

CK: One interesting thing on the sound track is a heartbeat pattern. It provided an emotional tone through some of the things that were being said.

MR: It was a synthesized heartbeat, but a heartbeat. I knew that I'd eventually come to the line where I say on camera, "In search of self, I listen to the beat of my heart." The payoff was to keep on getting much further down. That's how I used the heartbeat — as I was doing with lots of the images and with audio in general. I wanted constantly to re-contextualize things so they'd mean something different each time you hear them. The first time you hear the heartbeat is over the title sequence, where you see me in slow-mo. It played like a rhythm, an introduction; it was dramatic. There it was just an audio device, nothing more than a heartbeat. You don't know what it means, it's just emerging from something. The next time you hear it is where you see the Castro images, and then you're hearing it in relation to me in particular, so perhaps it's my heartbeat. Then you start hearing it in relation to others' heartbeats, in the wages-of-silence sequence where you hear all these homophobic statements. There it's heartbeat as anger, a pounding, everything held within, muffled, tense. It beats, "Boom-boom," while you're hearing all this screaming and shouting, "Faggot, nigger, queer." During all this invective, you're getting this constant beat. It's a device but it's also a way of evoking that tension you feel when everything is constrained. When you don't speak out, the tension is just sort of there, just about to break the surface, held and not quite let go, always just barely there. Later the heartbeat becomes salvation, particularly when you get the chant and anger vented. When the heartbeat comes

through that, it becomes almost a resolution. So you are looking your heartbeat as a source of life and then eventually a source of death, since entwined with its ticking is the virus, a source of death. I wanted to play with that paradox.

The ending was difficult because I wanted the tape to have a positive, glowing release. You've gotten through all this, glowing and concluding, "Yes, we can be black and gay and proud." Yet I wanted to return people to the risks. The risks obviously are personal for me in a very direct sense, but the images and sounds also hit risks in a metaphoric sense. This is a struggle; there is paradox within this struggle; the heartbeat is life but the heartbeat can also be death. So I was playing with the heartbeat as a device. I don't know if viewers intellectually think of it like that. It's okay if they don't; they feel the increasingly important meaning of the beat throughout. As device, it is not redundant, just added there to keep things moving along, but rather it functions integrally, like the music and the poetry.

CK: It coalesces at one point where the line is, "I discovered a time bomb ticking in my blood." The beat which you've been hearing all along is an echo of that line, and then it's very inspiring. Right after that we get into the putting together of the black men in the gay rights demonstration with civil rights demonstrations.

MR: ...and all of my heroes from the history, the mini-history. Travel through the centuries of black American history in twenty seconds!

CK: At the end, TONGUES UNTIED brings together a lot of things, moving them out towards public demonstration. Up to that point we'd been in public space, but now there's a much more dramatic and open public drama and call to action.

MR: Unsympathetic viewers probably tune out long before, but if they stay to that point, it could make a lot of nationalists upset. To take our heroes and mix them in with a black gay rights march is totally repugnant and contradictory. How can you consider Frederick Jackson, and Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth in the same breath as gay men all marching down the street bare-chested? Obviously it makes perfect sense to me; from my vantage point that montage was absolutely necessary. I had to move my experience out of just the personal realm and make it a communal and public experience. But we also need to bring personal struggle into the political, social and cultural struggle. It's not sufficient to wage war just with the demons within but also with the demons outside. Part of the battle has been going on a long time. You understand that this is not something new, but that you're part of the struggle's continuum. You can draw resources and strength from previous battles won as well as lost, so you understand better what needs to be done to continue in the future. That was really important for me to say — not to remain personal and poetic but also to be hard edged and muscular in clarifying the connection between civil-rights black-American struggles for over three centuries and what we're doing now as black gay men.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The last word "P.C." hysteria

by the editors

from *Jump Cut*, no. 36, May 1991, pp. 127-128

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Originally, we used the term "politically correct" or "P.C." in the left and feminist movements to chide and gently mock those who held a "holier than thou" attitude in their political positions. In the past year academic conservatives, politicians including George Bush, and some of the media have appropriated the term "p.c." They are using it to attack a wide range of recent higher education activities including affirmative action plans for students and faculty, campus regulations intended to prevent ethnic and sexual harassment, and new multicultural curricula.

They have created the alarming impression that our universities have fallen under the control of authoritarian leftists, feminists, people of color, and gay and lesbian activists. Supposedly these progressives are busily imposing unamerican ideologies on students and intimidating those who object. We can easily see in this frenzied rhetoric the familiar tactics of demonizing and the Big Lie. With these highly emotional arguments such critics using the term "p.c." are trying to open up a space in colleges for bigotry and increased repression of people working for change.

Looked at carefully, this campaign against "political correctness," reveals itself as a new justification for hysterical race and gender stereotyping. At Northwestern University, for example, a professor claims in the student newspaper that freshman orientation discussions intended to increase awareness of cultural differences constitute a form of "brainwashing," worse than that practiced on U.S. prisoners during the Korean War. Conservative ideologue Dinesh D'Souza, recently on the talk-show circuit promoting his book, *Illiberal Education*, writes in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that homosexual students, among other groups, receive preference in college admission.

It's easy enough to dismiss such fevered fantasies, but in some areas the conservatives have hit a responsive chord among many moderate faculty and students. Particularly in the area of free speech, campus communities have traditionally and justifiably concerned themselves with protecting and promoting a broad range of expression. By playing up some extreme cases, conservatives have enlisted the concern of a broader group. But the free speech issue is deceptive. On the surface it appears to be about First Amendment rights. This is what the right

has trumpeted.

Below the surface lie the drastically changing demographics of higher education and major changes taking place in U.S. social life. At the end of this decade white men will be a minority of those entering the work force. College educated women increasingly expect to have careers competitive with men. People of color are a more visible and active presence on campus and in public life. Many lesbian and gay students and some faculty are out and are outspoken. In many cities the gay and lesbian communities have become an important political force. Mediocre, straight white men, who in the past would have been carried along on their privilege, are the big losers in these changes. Now, those young white men who do not have the talent and perseverance to compete will fall to the wayside. And academic disciplines that have been male preserves will just have to change.

College administrators already find it necessary to increase student awareness of diversity and promote tolerance. On campuses where hundreds, thousands, and tens of thousands of new students arrive every fall to start living the culture mix of the future with their peers, orientation sessions on offensive speech simply take their place along with those on choosing a major, drug and alcohol policy, sexually transmitted disease prevention, or date rape. While a few horror stories can be trotted out to alarm First Amendment absolutists, in fact, there's not much of substance to support the idea that campus free speech is menaced by such administrative policy. Free speech worriers could better direct their attention to high schools and the military services if they want to find unreasonable restrictions on speech.

The arch-reactionary National Association of Scholars runs ads that denounce special admissions programs in colleges. These ads read as if it were common practice to admit unqualified students of color to fill minority admission quotas. Actually, athletes and the children and relatives of alums and large donors make up the largest number of students given special consideration when they apply but fall below admission standards. Of course, since conservatives support the results of these two exceptions, the hypocritical NAS studiously ignores this much more prevalent imbalance. The NAS calls for a meritocracy, but it carefully avoids mentioning that if merit were strictly followed in admissions, many more high school women would be admitted than men based on GPAs and college test scores.

In an earlier editorial we outlined some of the major structural shifts influencing curriculum change in higher education ("Disharmonic Convergence," JUMP CUT 34). Shifts from liberal arts to business and communication curricula are irreversible in the long run. Capitalism will continue to function efficiently in the face of changing workforce demographics and transnational economics. And this efficient functioning demands that managers themselves be multiculturally sophisticated, liberal about gender politics, and media literate as well as fluent in print culture.

Ironically, one result of this new and noisy assault from the Right may turn out to be a new-found solidarity among beleaguered progressives. Frequently fragmented and divided by old quarrels and factionalism, the very feministmarxist-Third World-gay/lesbian-media-studies conspiracy conjured up by the Right may in fact unite us now that we face a common enemy. We see some evidence that past divisiveness and isolation are being overcome. Certainly more leaders are calling

for a sensible coalition politics to face the Right. But this will not happen without considerable work on our part.

We can't simply trust to history to make everything work out. Today's 18-22 year old undergraduates were ages 6-10 when Reagan took office. Their experiences and the media representations they've grown up with differ drastically from earlier generations. The counterculture spirit of the 60s (now a quarter century past) becomes today's drug and alcohol abuse warning of THE DOORS. The Civil Rights Movement becomes lobotomized into DRIVING MISS DAISY or totally rewritten as MISSISSIPPI BURNING.

It's not surprising then that many students today are profoundly skeptical of and sometimes hostile to the rhetoric of progressive movements from the past. Though our causes are still just and our grievances still active, we have lost much mass support. It is becoming clear that there is a dialectical relation between social movements and the languages they create. The language speaks the movement and the movement gives explanatory force to the language. We need to remind ourselves of the old organizer's rule of thumb: Start where they are at and not where you wish they were.

The progressive movements that grew out of the 1960s and developed through the 1970s and 80s never really developed a unified theory of class, race, and gender, nor a unified practice of activism around class/ race/ gender. We see the need for both this kind of theory and this kind of practice, while respecting attempts to present the multiplicity of consciousness for change. Cultural activists, theorists, artists, students of change may have the most crucial contribution to make here. Strictly political thinking hasn't taken us as far as we need to go. A politics which recognizes culture and consciousness and the multiple subjectivities of individuals and movements can move us further.

In many colleges across the country, students of color and gays and lesbians, in particular, want to demand a curriculum that represents their experience and grant them full visibility. Black students justly want more taught about African American culture and history than the story of victimization, with its emphasis on slavery. Many students of color suspect the canon, with its focus on hegemonic Euro-American culture and such keystone courses as "Western Civilization." The Right's offensive against curricular change is really a demand that formerly "invisible" (to them) concerns go back to seeming invisible. For example, feminist students and teachers find that their demands to avoid sexist language in the classroom still meet overt putdowns. Women's, gays', and people of color's demands for a more just curriculum need active, imaginative support from progressive faculty and administration. When those who shape the dominant culture, especially educators, consistently elicit underrepresented groups' analyses about educational institutions, we all have a chance to learn something new about what we teach and what we have been taught.

The Right will always enact a schizophrenic pattern of calling for individual liberty while also slavishly upholding authority. Their campaign against "political correctness" is wrapped in the flag they don't want burned and tied with an imperialist yellow ribbon. Their version of "free speech" never mentions U.S. Government control and manipulation of Gulf War news. It's not hard to challenge the Right's flimsy argument not, of course, on the basis of political correctness, but

with common sense and logic.

[To top](#) [Current issue](#) [Archived essays](#) [Jump Cut home](#)